



\$2.50 a year.

Entered at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., at Second Class Mail Rates.

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July 3, 1883.

No 190. VOL. VIII. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

Pretty and Proud; OR, THE GOLD-BUG OF FRISCO.

A Story of a Girl's Folly.

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BARBARA," "A WILD GIRL," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ROSEBUDS.

THAT was a bewitching day for Mercedes. A girl can never have more than one eighteenth birthday; and seldom is even a girl's eighteenth birthday attended by such a lovely and splendid train of circumstances. All her friends had sent presents and congratulations; Aunt Esther had read to her a will, drawn up the previous evening, giving her all the property; and now

she was to formally "come out" at a rosebud dinner-party that afternoon, gotten up by this same Aunt Esther for her benefit, and afterward the whole little party was to occupy a box at the opera.

It was February, but it was not winter in Miss Silverman's beautiful house, which was as fragrant as a garden in June, with the thousands of cut flowers which decorated it. Rosebuds and smilax were twined together all over it; beds of them on the mantle-pieces, sprays of them drooping from the chandeliers, wreaths of them creeping along the cornices. Up-stairs in the room where Mercedes was dressing, the table was loaded down with ravishing bouquets, in which the loveliest rosebuds were conspicuous. One of these bouquets was the most exquisite, where all were beautiful. It was formed solely of just-opening creamy-white buds—each bud a wonder of perfection—set about with a delicate fringe of maiden-hair fern.

The card attached to this box bore the name of Lord Henry Essex. Sitting before the long

mirror while Rosine, her aunt's maid, put up her wonderful hair, Mercedes was thinking:

"I have beauty and style; I ought to be a success."

But this was only one of her thoughts. Paint a sunrise over a May landscape and you may paint a girl's fancies on the day of her "coming out." Mercedes was not very vain, considering how pretty she was, but she was ambitious. She wanted to be herself—distinguished for something.

Nature had already selected her as one born to be noticed. Her beauty was peculiar. Along with an olive-pale complexion, and the darkest possible hazel eyes, it had given her bright gold hair.

Mercedes took a good look at herself when Rosine had given the finishing touches to her toilet. She looked very tall and slim, with her hair arranged high on her head and worn with a crimped fringe across the forehead, and the long train of her white dress twisting about her feet. The tea-rosebuds in her hair and scattered



"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME SO? YOU KNOW THAT I DO NOT CARE FOR YOU!"

over her dress Rosine declared to be the exact color of her skin; they were more yellow than white, and flushed with a lovely graining of pink like that in their wearer's cheeks. Their long fringes gave a sweet expression to her dark eyes; otherwise Mercedes was rather proud-looking for one so young.

After she had taken up her fan and handkerchief she selected the bouquet which Lord Henry had sent, because it was the loveliest.

"I wonder if I shall like him," she thought; "I am anxious to see him, Aunt Esther raves so about him."

Then Mercedes went down to the drawing-room, light as day with the blaze of wax candles and gas imprisoned in moony globes, and found Aunt Esther already there, dressed in the heavy Antwerp silk, and East Indian diamonds which so well became her. She was staring into the fire of cannel-coal which supplemented the summer temperature made by the furnace; staring so intently, and so lost in thought, that, at first, she did not perceive her niece standing near, waiting to be admired.

Mercedes thought how pretty her aunt still was. If the girl was a rosebud the woman was a rose. She had large, lambent dark eyes; thick, dusky, lusterless hair; a skin fine and pale as ivory. She was tall and elegant of figure, with the composed mien of an empress. No one would have guessed her to be thirty-six who saw her then with the rosy light of the fire playing over her handsome face.

"I declare, auntie, I am jealous of you, you look so sweet!"

Miss Silverman started from her reverie, answering, after a minute, as she surveyed her niece critically:

"You have no reason to be, darling. You will have no rivals to-night. That ivory-white silk with the creamy tissue over its suits you precisely. I thought it would. It is still a few minutes too early to expect our guests; draw up that ottoman, Mercedes, and let me talk to you."

Mercedes had never known a mother. Miss Silverman had taken charge of her since she was a babe; no mother could have been more tender or more generous. She took one of her niece's velvet-soft little hands in her own, then, and began giving her some advice as to her conduct, now that she was no longer a school-girl but a young lady. Mercedes felt somewhat awed at the serious manner in which her responsibilities to society were set forth; she had been in a delicious dream all day—a dream of extravagant anticipation—and she felt a little sobered for a time, but quickly recovered her spirits.

There were invited to her dinner-party three young ladies, four young gentlemen, and Major Stokes, of the Seventh Regiment, a friend and distant relative of the family, who always came when wanted to balance Aunt Esther at the other end of the table.

Mercedes knew all these people pretty well, except Lord Henry Essex, who had only arrived in New York from England the previous Saturday. He had brought a letter to Miss Silverman from his father, the earl, which he had presented on Monday, immediately receiving an invitation to the dinner on Wednesday. Mercedes had been out during his call so that she had the pleasure of imagining what he was like.

"I don't think, auntie, that I shall fancy the English lord," she said, looking into the fire. "How old did you say he was?"

"I should say about twenty-four. There he is now! I hear his voice in the hall," and the ladies rose as Mephistopheles, the colored *factotum* of the establishment, ushered in "my lord."

Mercedes was not shy; she seldom felt any diffidence in making new acquaintances; but she blushed under the first glance which the young Englishman fixed upon her.

The curious part of it was that Lord Henry Essex blushed, too. It was, on both sides, a case of admiration at first sight—such admiration as passes rapidly into love.

Lord Henry was taken by surprise. He had not expected to meet a young lady like that in America, and the surprise deepened the fascination of her beauty.

Mercedes had expected to meet a young gentleman who would repel her by his snobbery. Instead, she had never witnessed more simple, easy manners, nor met the glance of eyes more frank and pleasant. They had a few moments' chat before the other guests arrived, and when Lord Henry took her out to dinner the two were fast friends.

Is it any wonder that the sumptuous table, with its center-piece composed of pink and

white rosebuds, its costly porcelain, its softly-moving attendants, seemed to the girl to be spread with the feast of the fairies?

Is there any delight in the world so utterly sweet and wonderful as when two young people first begin to perceive that their admiration is mutual? Oh, the mystery and the witchery of it!

Mercedes grew lovelier every moment, and Lord Henry knew it. He watched the kindling of those fine eyes, and the rose-tints coming and going in the velvet cheeks; he said, with a world of meaning in his light whisper:

"I am so happy because you have honored my bouquet by carrying it."

"I chose it because it was the most perfect. I had not seen you then, Lord Henry."

"Would you have chosen it if you had seen me?"

"Certainly," with a smile, "for it would still have been the loveliest. I'm going to take all my bouquets to the opera, Lord Henry, to flaunt them in the faces of the other girls, as tokens of my success. There's a grain of meanness in all girls, you see."

"I will not believe that, Miss Vance."

"Because you don't know us."

"I would like to know you better."

"There is auntie rising from the table. We shall lose the first act of the opera."

"That is nothing. I have lost my head, already, this evening. I dare say, Miss Vance, you will like to arrive late, seeing you have twenty-six bouquets."

She raised her brilliant eyes to his with a laugh in them:

"Such are the triumphs girls live for," she said.

When Mercedes went up to put on her opera-cloak, she came down without the bouquet of white rosebuds, though she had all the others. Lord Henry's heart beat high; he guessed rightly that she had laid it away to preserve it.

Miss Silverman's box at the Academy, that evening, was the cynosure of all the glasses. Four pretty girls—one among them an undisputed beauty—and an English lord, were enough to fix the admiration of the crowd.

Mercedes had blossomed into sudden perfection. Every nerve in her thrilled to the excitement of the hour and quivered under the pulsing of the rich music; but she did honor to her training; not once did she allow too warm a blush or too high a tone to betray the dancing of her heart, but hid her joyous impulsiveness under a high-bred quiet which charmed Lord Henry.

Poor child! it was a heavenly evening to her. She did not know till then that so much happiness *could* be crowded into a few hours. All that love and luxury could do to make her birthday pleasant had been done. Lord Henry placed her in her aunt's carriage when they left the Academy, and, asking permission to call in the morning, bade them good-night, and then called a cab to take him to his hotel.

Mercedes leaned back in the cushions with a sigh of content.

"Auntie, I've had such a happy day!"

"I meant you to have, darling."

"Yes, auntie, I know. You are always so good to me. I am almost glad I have no mother, for I see plenty of girls whose mothers are not half so indulgent as you are to me."

"Yes, darling," answered Aunt Esther, vaguely; but Mercedes could not tell, by the light of the street-lamps, that she had turned pale; and the lady was glad of that.

In a few moments the carriage drew up before their house; the coachman jumped from his box and assisted the ladies out.

"There is some one crouching in the doorway," said Miss Silverman. "Thomas, ring the bell and stay with us till the door is opened. You may have to call a policeman."

"I hardly think so, madam," said a voice, at the first tones of which the lady gave a faint scream; and the man arose slowly to his feet. "I wanted to wait inside, by the library fire, but your servants were too prudent, madam. So I curled myself up on your doorstep like a dog; and devilish cold I find it, too. I want to see you, on business. I have not forgotten that this is the twentieth of December—"

"Oh, hush!" pleaded Miss Silverman.

"Am I to come in?"

"It is late—almost midnight; but yes—"

"That's right. We won't have any trouble, madam."

Mephistopheles stood holding the door wide open, and gazing, the whites of his eyes showing frightfully, first upon the man, then upon his mistress.

"I kep' him out. He couldn't take me in wid his nonsense," he stammered.

"You did right; but this—this person is an old acquaintance of mine, and—and I will hear what he has to say. Go up to your room, Mercedes; and, Mephistopheles, give this gentleman a seat in the library."

Mercedes, wholly astonished and partially alarmed, looked at her aunt. The group was now in the hall, where the gas was blazing brightly. Aunt Esther, usually so calm and peerless, was shockingly pale and disturbed. The stranger was looking at her in a cool, malignant way that angered Mercedes. He was shabbily dressed and had a vagrant, dissipated aspect.

"Auntie, you surely are not going to talk to that man *alone*?"

Aunt Esther turned upon the troubled girl a look of anguish.

"Go up-stairs, at once," she commanded, trying to place her own person between the girl and the intruder, whose eager glance was now turned from Miss Silverman and fixed on her niece.

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE SURPRISE.

MERCEDES went quickly to her room. She felt chilled and despondent. It was as if a winter wind had blown out of a summer sky. She sunk down in a chair and burst into tears.

"What is it, mademoiselle?" asked Rosine, who had waited up.

"Oh, I don't know. I was frightened by a man on the steps."

Presently Meph knocked at the door to say that missa was to retire, and Rosine, too, as soon as she had undressed Miss Mercedes. There was nothing to do but obey. Mercedes was soon in bed, with Rosine gone to her own little room, and nobody to soothe her, or assure her she had no reason to be frightened. Her chamber was over the library, and she could hear the murmur of suppressed voices, talking, talking, talking. It seemed so strange that proud Aunt Esther should give audience to such a creature, and she had looked so stricken and wretched that her niece could not sleep.

Instead of sinking into happy dreams of her triumphant day, the uneasy child tossed and turned, and saw only the bad face of the man who was talking to her aunt in the room below.

After what seemed to her many hours she fell into restless slumbers. From these something awakened her, and opening her eyes, she saw her aunt standing by her bedside, holding a lamp in her hand, and still dressed in her silk and diamonds.

But, was it really her aunt, or only a wan ghost resembling her?

"Rise, darling; throw this dressing-gown about you, and come down."

The voice was so feeble and hollow that Mercedes shivered as she sprung out of bed.

"What is it, auntie? Has the man gone away?"

"Poor child, no, no! He wants to see *you*, my poor darling."

"To see me? I'm not going down."

"You *must*. Mercedes, I would rather be lying in my coffin now than have had that man's eye rest upon you. But I cannot help myself. He has demanded to speak with you; I am powerless to forbid him."

"Demanded to speak with me! Really, auntie, I think him an impertinent wretch. Speak to me, indeed! Tell him I have no desire for the honor of his acquaintance, and then go to bed. Auntie, dear, it must be nearly morning."

At that instant a clock on the mantle-piece chimed out the hour of five.

"Why, Aunt Esther, have you been talking with that creature all these hours?"

Mercedes stood, the blue silk dressing-gown in her hands, still hesitating to obey her relatives too astonished, too stunned with incredulity, fear to know what to do.

Aunt Esther groaned and wrung her hands.

"You *must*—you *must* come with me and see him. I cannot help myself. Mercedes, have I not always treated you as if I loved you? Have I not been kind to you, fond of you?"

"Yes, yes, dear Aunt Esther!"

"Believe me then, when I say that I had rather see you dead than going down to meet that man, considering what he is going to say to you. Yet I cannot help myself. Oh, my darling, always remember that I could not help it!—that I put off the evil hour as long as possible! Put it off months and years. Now, it has come at last!"

By this time Mercedes was as pale as her aunt;

her hands trembled so that she could hardly fasten the gown which she threw on over her night-dress; her teeth chattered; there was a pain in her heart—vague horror of she knew not what seized upon every nerve.

Miss Silverman caught hold of her icy little hand and drew her across the room and down the stairs. The rooms were as warm as they had been through the day; the odor of the festival roses loaded the air and brought back to Mercedes one vivid thought of Lord Henry and of yesterday's delight, as she went, shivering and shrinking, down the broad stairs in the semi-darkness.

A stronger light came through the half-opened library door. Esther did not know it, but she moaned at every step, while her convulsive clasp almost crushed the small hand which she grasped.

Nevertheless she went on, dragging her niece after her, until she had pushed open the door and stood within the room, Mercedes beside her. The girl drew up her slim figure to its utmost height and flashed out of her beautiful dark eyes a look of scorn at the shabby man, who sat in an easy-chair by the table, one leg crossed over the other, in an attitude expressive of careless ease.

His battered felt hat lay on the carpet near at hand; an odor of stale tobacco-smoke triumphed over the delicate perfume of the flowers on the mantle; leaning back among the velvet cushions at his ease he allowed a low whistle to escape his lips as his deep-set, half-shut eyes ran over the defiant face and figure of Mercedes.

"By Joopiter," he exclaimed, after a long minute, "you're a beauty, gal!"

"Sir!"

"I say yo'or a beauty, an' I reckon you'll create quite considerable of a sensation out thar to the mines. Bill 'n' Dick, an' Bob'll dance a war-dance round the shanty when they find what an all-fired handsome gal I've brought out to the Gold Land."

"Why do you allow this person to talk so to me, Aunt Esther?"

Esther could not meet the proud glance of those young eyes which she loved better than anything this side of heaven; she looked down on the floor, while her teeth were pressed into her lower lip until it bled, and her face was drawn and rigid.

"Little gal," continued the stranger, drawing a large gold hunting-case watch from its pocket and consulting it, "I'm in a hurry. I'd like to git the seven o'clock morning train that will pull out from the station in jest one hour an' three quarters. It's short notice, I don't deny, for a stylish young lady for to pack up her duds; but it's all the time I can allow ye. One trunk 'll hev to do ye; expensive hauling extra baggage out to the Pacific," and he smiled pleasantly.

"What is he talking about, Aunt Esther?"

Still the alarmed and scornful girl got no reply from her aunt, who only shivered and moaned and would not look at her.

"Miss Silverman," continued the man, coolly, "I'll trust it to you to see that she's ready. No fooling now; look sharp!"

"Come, Mercedes," whispered Esther, after a minute's silence. "Come!"

"Come where, auntie?"

"To—to—get ready for your journey."

Her voice was sharp and strange; she avoided meeting that puzzled and terrified glance that sought hers, but strove to drag her niece out of the room as she had dragged her in.

"Stop, Aunt Esther! Let go my hand! Why don't you look at me? What does this all mean? I must be dreaming," murmured Mercedes. "I wish I could shake off this ugly nightmare! I suppose it has come because I fell asleep thinking of that fellow down-stairs."

"A deuced good joke," laughed the man. "The nightmare, eh? Well, it's a nightmare as will carry you a good ways on its back. Esther, I think you ought to have prepared her, as it were, fur this."

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE JOURNEY.

"How could I prepare her?" burst from Esther's lips, almost in a shriek. "I have tried—tried, oh, so often! But I *could* not! The words choked me. They stuck in my parched throat. I never could tell her. And, of late years, I have been half-hoping that I never would have to tell her. Ah! Benjamin Brant, if you had one grain of mercy in your heart, you would still accept the offer I made you to-night, and allow me to keep my darling."

"Mercedes! Mercedes! believe me, I have been on my knees to him! I have begged, prayed, offered him all my fortune, except a mere

trifle to keep you and I in bread, if he would go away from here, leaving you in ignorance and me in peace! He will not do it! He wants his long-studied, cold-blooded *revenge*! If I had not come to you, my darling, and forced you to meet him here, he would have gone to your room. My darling, my heart is broken."

Mercedes, trembling with terror of what she did not understand, but haughtily facing the impudent intruder, now turned and threw her arms about her aunt's neck.

"Dear, dear, dear auntie! I am sorry for you."

"Two minutes of precious time wasted," grunted the man. "Come, girl, if you must have everything explained—which is natural enough, I s'pose—I'll out with it at once. I'm your father, and I've come for you to go home with me."

"My father. Now I know you are telling falsehoods, sir. My father died when I was three months old."

The beautiful girl turned upon him with an air of dignity as she said this; her proud statement was met by another laugh.

"He didn't die, little gal; he only run away to Californy. I'll be apt to know all about that, as I'm the man."

"But you—you *could* not be my father," asserted Mercedes.

She said it with such evident faith in her own unbelief that the woman to whom she clung moaned out:

"He is telling you the truth."

Then Mercedes gave a little cry, withdrew herself from her aunt's embrace, retreated a step or two, and faced them both with the piteous look of a wounded fawn.

"When I adopted you," Esther went on, passionately, "I could not foresee all the consequences. Your father was in prison, accused of murder, but escaped about that time, and fled to California. I had no reason to suppose that he would ever wish or venture to return, or that your parentage would ever be made known to you; and although, after you got old enough to understand, I often considered that you had best be told all, I never could gain courage to prepare you for this remote, this cruel possibility. You were such a proud and sensitive child, and the danger seemed so remote and so cruel, I could not crush your pride and shadow your sunny life by the sad story."

Mercedes opened her lips as if trying to say something, but no sound came from them, and Esther went on hurriedly:

"I became so fond of you; you were like an own child to me; my heart refused to believe that anything ever *could* happen to separate us. It is wicked, cruel, inhuman in you, Benjamin Brant, to come here now, to crush this child with the knowledge of what you are to her! You did not know her—did not love her—had no claim on her except that you were her parent; *why* did you come to break both our hearts?—to kill this poor child by taking her from me?"

"We talked that all over once to-night. There's no more time to be fooled away in gab. I want my daughter. I've come from the West to set up my claim to this purty piece o' property; an' I intend to take her back with me."

"Aunt Esther, I am eighteen. Does the *law* give me to him?" asked Mercedes, barely able to speak.

"I could appeal to the courts; but—there are reasons—oh God, I shall go mad before morning breaks!"

"Poor, poor Aunt Esther! Then you *want* me to go with him?"

Esther looked at her in utter despair; Mercedes repeated:

"You *want* me to go with him?"

"I cannot help myself," was the shuddering reply.

"Let me tell my child one thing before she goes with me," said the man, speaking with more dignity than he had hitherto used—"I was accused of murder, and I broke jail and ran away because the circumstantial evidence was strong against me; but I was not guilty of the crime. I was obliged to abandon home and child, and lead a roving life, for a sin of which I was innocent. Only a year ago the man who *did* commit the murder died; on his death-bed he made confession; of this confession I only heard a few weeks ago. It restored to me the privilege of taking back my own name, and set me at liberty to return to my old associates, if I so willed; but the habits of seventeen years are not easily broken, and I'm happier out there than I should be here. It don't strike me as being so very wicked and inhuman that I should feel a longing to see my own child; nor that, finding her so sweet and handsome, I should set

store on taking her back with me. I've been alone a good while."

His voice quivered on the last sentence. But it could not be expected that Mercedes should be touched by the appeal in it—should feel any pity for one who was doing her such an injury, blighting her pride, her hopes, her affections—tearing her away from the life she was accustomed to. She looked at him coldly while he spoke; then turned to her aunt.

"You could not have been much older than I am when you adopted me. It is strange that you should have done such a thing when you were so young!"

A burning wave flashed over Esther Silverman's pale face and swept away again, leaving it more like marble than before.

"It was my mother who first adopted you," she said, "but she was taken from earth not long after, and I took up her charge."

"And you are not really my aunt?"

"No, my darling," in a faint voice, with wavering eyes.

"I have no claim upon you? There is no tie of blood between us?"

The wavering eyes avoided hers; there was no answer.

"And it is your wish that I go with—with this person?"

Esther wrung her hands in agony.

"Then I must go. It is not for me to remain where I am no longer wanted. I will not keep you waiting long, sir. I have nothing at all of my own to take with me; and I shall only claim from—Miss Silverman's bounty enough to enable me to comply with her wishes."

Still Esther did not defend herself. Mercedes went past her, and she did not move to accompany her up-stairs.

The girl went to her room and quickly dressed herself in a traveling-suit which had done her service on her little journeys to and from the school she had recently attended; she placed a change of clothing and some toilet articles in a small bag, looked about tearlessly on her little world of treasures, and started for the door.

Then she hesitated and went back.

The white rosebuds which Lord Harry had given her were slowly opening into roses in their vase on her dressing-table. She took them out, kissed them passionately, and crowded them into the traveling-bag. Still she did not cry. She was too stunned for tears.

As she descended the velvet-covered stairs, Aunt Esther stood at the foot, supporting herself by clinging to the newel-post.

"Good-by, Aunt Esther," said the girl, giving her a single kiss; then, as Benjamin Brant came out of the library, she said:

"I am ready, sir."

He took the little bag from her hand, opened the door, and the two—the shabby-looking, rough man and the lovely, elegant girl—went out, side by side.

When Mephistopheles came down that morning, he found his mistress lying at the foot of the stairs, insensible; he called Rosine, and when the two had revived her and assisted her up to her couch in her up-stairs sitting-room, she asked them, faintly, to leave her there, and there she remained, hour after hour, moaning over and over:

"Coward, coward! Oh, what a coward I was! Why did I let her go? Why did I not tell her all? Oh, cowardice and shame! Would to God I had defied him and told her all!"

Meantime, out into the chill darkness of a wintry morning Mercedes had gone with this strange father who claimed her. As they went down the steps some bell in that quarter tolled six. It seemed to her as if it was tolling for her death.

It was only one little hour since the ormolu clock in her chamber had chimed five, yet in that hour the whole face of the world had been changed for her.

She walked steadily along by the stranger's side. The brilliant winter stars were dying out one by one in the stronger flush of a rosy morning. The streets were silent and weird. They crossed over a less fashionable avenue, where they took the first horse-car for the up-town railroad station they were seeking. Arrived there, Brant sought out a restaurant and had some breakfast. He offered some to his daughter, which she haughtily declined.

It was broad daylight now; she pulled her thick veil closely over her face; she was ashamed of the man who took her through the gates, helped her onto the cars, found a seat for her and placed himself beside her. She was ashamed of him so far as she was conscious of any emotion. She felt very dumb and stupid. She was like a person who has received a severe injury and is benumbed under the shock, until reaction

begins, when all the acuteness of his agony is realized. The bustle about the train increased, the cars filled up, the bell rung and the Pacific express moved out, and began to fly along the rails, as soon as the city streets were left behind.

Ben Brant would have liked his companion to talk, to tell him something about her past life; but her veil was down, and there was something so chilling in her proud voice when she answered him that he desisted for the present, and buying a morning paper, sought to immerse himself in that. Mercedes sat at his side still as the seat itself. She was dumb and half unconscious. She saw field, forest and village go by as the dying see what passes around them, dimly and without interest.

The long, long winter morning wore on.

At noon the train came to a stop opposite a station; the brakeman and conductor shouted, "Ten minutes for refreshments;" Mercedes came to her senses with a start.

"Won't you have something to eat now, daughter?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then I will," he said, and arose and passed out of the car.

"This is the hour Lord Henry was to call," thought the wretched girl, and it swept over her in a fresh wave of agony, the memory of what she had lost and what she was going to. She saw Lord Henry, in her mind's eye, all handsome and *debonair*, running lightly up the steps to her aunt's stately house, ringing the bell with a pleasant look of expectation, asking for Miss Silverman and for *her*. She saw, in imagination, the blank look which came into his eager blue eyes when her aunt told him that she had gone away.

Then Mercedes stood quickly up and stared about her on every side; it seemed to her that she must get out of the car and fly, no matter where, so that she got away and hid herself from that coarse, vulgar stranger, who called himself her father.

But she was a timid creature; then, too, if this insufferable person *was* her father—and Aunt Esther had testified to that—it was her duty to remain with him, at least during the time which must elapse before she was of age. The idea that her aunt had not forbidden the man's taking her with him came back upon her with crushing force, pushing her down into her seat again, as if it had been a palpable hand.

If there had not been some good reason why she should go, Aunt Esther, who loved her so, never would have permitted it.

The long afternoon went by as the morning had done. When she refused to get out and partake of supper at the station where it was served, her father scolded her for an obstinate chit, which so frightened and distressed her, that she went with him without further parley and choked down a miserable meal and a cup of hot tea. Then her bed was made up in the sleeping-car.

Night and day, night and day, they were whirled along, scarcely speaking to each other—Mercedes wrapped in a dull dream of monotonous suffering, broken only by a more weary delay when he left her a whole day alone in her room at a Chicago hotel—until the barren "Foot Hills" came in sight, and they got off at last, with numb feet and dizzy brains, at a rude station amid those precursors of the mountains beyond.

CHAPTER IV.

"IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

THERE are mental sufferings for which there is no opiate but death—when death and the grave are looked forward to as a sweet relief. Such agony as this did Esther Silverman endure when she came out of that long swoon and was left alone in her room by her anxious and wondering servants.

Miss Silverman's very servants were proud and fond of her; Rosine and Mephistopheles were troubled enough at her condition, and still more worried at the unaccountable absence of Miss Mercedes. The man, in particular, felt a sad presentiment that something strange and painful had taken place, for he was cognizant of the long interview which his mistress had held with the disreputable-appearing stranger on the previous night.

More than once he knocked at the door of her room, receiving no answer, and going away with a perplexed expression.

Esther Silverman, her long dark hair streaming over her shoulders, her face livid, her eyelids swollen with crying, was walking restlessly up and down, or throwing herself on the couch

in deeper and ever darker bursts of despair. Once she moaned aloud:

"My punishment—my punishment has come!"

What could she have done that she should suffer so bitterly, yet acknowledge it as a punishment for some sin or error of hers?

Never had any woman lived a fairer life before the world.

Even the envious had never pointed the finger of scandal at her.

Handsome, rich, independent, with brilliant manners and a generous desire to do more than her part in society, she had been as popular as she could desire—a leader and favorite. Not a month of her life for the last twelve years but she had been compelled to listen to a declaration of love from some man whom her many charms of face or fortune, or both, had bewitched. Everybody knew that Esther Silverman remained unwed from choice. But nobody knew *why* she chose to be.

Nor would any one have understood to what she referred when, in her great anguish, she talked about "her punishment."

The endless hours of the long morning were wearing into afternoon when Meph came to the door once more.

"Lord Henry Essex is in the drawing-room, Miss Silverman."

"Tell him I am ill—quite unfit to see any one; and ask him if he will call at this hour to-morrow."

The eager light went out of Lord Henry's blue eyes when the obsequious servant delivered this message. He was very sorry his charming hostess of the previous evening was ill. She must be *very* ill, he thought, to prevent Miss Mercedes from leaving her long enough to see him for a few moments. He had anticipated—everything!—from the visit of this morning—to see the smile come into those dark eyes, the light glint on that gold hair, to hear the thrill of the low voice, to feel the delicious sympathy of stolen glances, to watch the sunrise color shoot up into the soft cheek.

It is not what lovers say to each other that makes the charm. It is that secret, shy, subtle understanding that grows up between them, as by magic. And he has flattered himself that some such mysterious sympathy already existed between the lovely American and himself. He was "full five fathoms deep" in love.

Reckless of the fact that his father was an earl, with a general distrust of untitled belles and a particular prejudice against "*la belle Americaine*"—heedless of the bitter opposition such a choice would meet from his family, Lord Henry had chewed the betel-leaves of a first passion, and his pulse fired and heart burned with the sweet intoxication. He had even gone so far in his madness as to say to himself:

"When my father sees my soul's fair choice, he will be as charmed as I am. Her peculiar beauty will set all my friends raving with admiration. All the portrait-painters in London will ask to paint her picture. She shall sit to our great artist, all dressed in white, as she was last night. He only can do justice to her lovely dark complexion—her skin so fine-grained and velvety—her soft, deep eyes, as dark as night—her tender smile—the superb carriage of that perfect head in the halo of pale gold hair!"

Dreaming thus, he rung Miss Silverman's door-bell; so that it is no wonder the fire went out of his eyes and the flush out of his face when the polite servant brought him his dismissal.

As he went down the steps again he felt dull and homesick. He was three-quarters inclined to believe that he was an egregious egotist, and Miss Mercedes's blushes and kindling smiles and low, thrilling tones when she spoke with him, meant nothing at all of what he thought.

He was miserable all day; he half-resolved to return immediately to England; but he was not allowed to shut himself up in his room at the hotel as he would have liked, as an English lord is too precious a creature to be allowed to waste his time in solitude after the hunters of New York society once give chase. He was dragged to Central Park, *albeit* the day was cold and windy; he lunched with Mrs. Croesus; he kettledrummed with Miss Flannemills; he dined with the Goldmines and went to the opera with the Kerosenes, ending a weary day by dancing the German at Mrs. Wholesale's.

At none of these distinguished places did he find the only face and figure which had charms for him. Plenty of fair, elegant girls, stylish young creatures, full of spirit and wit, dressed like angels, in long, clinging robes of shimmering silken textures bespattered with flowers and jewels—girls quite the equals of the Lady Mays and Ediths he knew in the charmed circle of May-fair—but not the slender, dark girl whose

dusky eyes and sunbeam hair had caught his idle heart in their net. There were 'none like her, none.' Lord Henry went to bed certain that Miss Silverman must be very ill, and that her niece could not have seen him when he called.

Punctually at noon the following day he called again, and was admitted. As he waited, with fast-throbbing pulse, in the soft gloom of the luxurious drawing-room, Miss Silverman herself advanced to meet him, out of the long vista of the suit of rooms.

He arose and held out his hand, saying earnestly:

"How glad I am to find you able to be up, Miss Silverman!" and then, as her cold fingers touched his, he saw that she must have been very ill, indeed.

She was pale as death, with black circles under her eyes and a haggard look which made her strangely unlike the brilliant, handsome lady he had so much admired; but she kept her easy manners and her talent for small-talk, and deprecating his anxiety for her health, dashed off into a lively conversation.

His lordship's blue eyes, however, roved restlessly, considering how well-bred a man he was, at every slightest sound, while his ear was strained to hear the rustle of a silken robe which did not come. At last his hostess said smilingly:

"You must not expect to see Miss Mercedes to-day. She has gone on a visit."

"I regret missing the pleasure of seeing her," was the stiff reply.

The words seemed to freeze on the lips of the caller; but it was not his place to ask questions, nor did he; though he lingered some time in the hope that more information might be vouchsafed him.

At last Miss Silverman said, as if in pity for his state of mind:

"My niece has gone to her relatives; she will be away all winter."

In the midst of his keen disappointment Lord Henry noticed that she pressed her hand to her heart as if she had a pain there and that a more ashen pallor spread over her face.

"I wonder if she has heart-disease, poor lady?" he thought. Then, in his own candid way, he said, as he arose to go: "I am sorry I made Miss Mercedes's acquaintance at all, since it is to extend no further. I never saw a young lady I admired so much, and I hoped to become good friends with her. Will you give her my regards when you write to her, please, and say—Good heavens! she certainly *has* heart-disease! What shall I do?" and looking about for a bell-knob he pulled one violently, for Miss Silverman in attempting to rise from her chair had fallen back and fainted away.

Mephistopheles came in immediately and then Lord Henry went away. The next day he was in Washington, where he remained a fortnight; then he went to Florida; came back and stopped in New York a few days; called on Miss Silverman and learned that her niece was still away; went back to England in poor spirits; and soon from over the sea there floated a rumor to his New York friends that he was engaged to be married to his cousin, Lady Maud; and Esther Silverman, hearing it, smiled bitterly, packed her trunk, shut up her house, took Rosine and Mephistopheles, and sailed for France.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEW LIFE IN GOLD LAND.

BENJAMIN BRANT only stopped at the little station in the Rocky Mountains a single day, the most of which he spent in a secret confab with two men who met him there, his daughter remaining in the one big room of the new board-and-muslin hotel, staring wretchedly out of an open window-frame, as yet guiltless of sash.

The following day they resumed their monotonous journey, nor did they leave the cars again until the train reached San Francisco. Here they went to the Palace Hotel, and Brant ordered his daughter to "put money in her purse" and go out shopping.

"I want you to understand, miss, that I'm a big man out here," he said to her, "if I *ain't* dressed-up and sweetened like one o' them New York whipper-snappers. I'll jest leave the dressin' to you! You do it up *brown*; fur we'll have some o' the big-bugs a-callin' on us in this here little parlor, if my presence in Frisco becomes known. There's Sharon and Murphy an' a lot of 'em that want to see me on business. They'll be in here to-morrow. I'll order a carriage an' you drive out an' get things to fix yourself up," and to her intense surprise, her rough father handed her a purse so heavy with gold double-eagles that she could hardly lift it.

She was tired of her dusty, grimy traveling-suit, and half-dead though she was, with mental distress and bodily weariness, felt some faint interest stirring in her dull heart, at the prospect of a fresh toilet, and a bath before the new things were donned.

She purchased three or four ready-made Parisian dresses, and such other articles as were needed for a comfortable but very modest outfit.

When she returned to their rooms, at the hotel, her father was gone. She took time for a luxurious bath, combed and brushed out her wonderful hair, put it up high on her head, as she was accustomed to wear it—with some difficulty, for she was used to the services of a maid—and chose, out of the three which had been sent home to her, a black velvet dress, with a bit of lace at the neck and wrists. Lastly, she fastened in her hair and on the black softness of the sumptuous velvet which covered her bosom, a half-opened white rose, which she had noted and bought of a flower-vender on her way back to the hotel.

All the time she was making her toilet she was thinking with surprise of what her father had said about being "a big man out here," and of the money he had so freely given her. More than once she doubted if she were truly in her senses, so strange and foreign to all her past experience was her present. She was walking up and down the small private parlor of their suite of rooms, trying to steady her brain and get some grasp upon her new life, when Brant entered.

He stared at that elegant creature whom he called his child:

"Well done, daughter! You've made good use o' my money. You beat the natives! I wonder what the nabobs will say when I show 'em my daughter! I ain't nowise ashamed o' her, to say the least."

"Oh, father, please do not force any acquaintances upon me! Keep those men away," pleaded Mercedes, tears rising in her eyes.

"Hem!" was the only response, and Benjamin Brant took a small morocco-case out of an inner pocket of his shaggy coat, opened it, and displayed before her, for her admiration, a massive necklace of gold and brilliants, shining on a violet-satin cushion: "There!" he exclaimed, triumphantly, "I just bought it! Tain't any too fine for you, Mercedes! You put it on an' wear it down to dinner, 'an' I tell you, we'll astonish the natives."

Mercedes's refined taste shrunk from the display of such gorgeous jewelry.

"Do I not look well enough as I am, Mr. Brant?"

"Mr. Brant! that's a good joke! However, I reckon it's hard on you—gettin' used to yer father! They say 'it's a wise child that knows its own father.' You never were wise till you got inside of the last fortnight, Mercedes, ha, ha! Do you look well enough?" He folded his arms, squinted one eye and took a good observation. "When it comes to *that*, child, you look better'n any living gal or woman I ever saw! That velvet dress sets you off. I'm glad you got it. But you oughter wear more jewelry. Blast it! I tell you, *we can afford it!*"

"But I don't like it. Girls of my age do not wear such heavy ornaments. Cannot you trust to my taste about getting myself up to please you?"

He took another squint at the graceful creature to whom he had lately set up a pre-emption right. She was paler than he would have liked, her manners were very quiet, she scarcely spoke above her breath, and yet she dazzled, confounded and overruled him.

"I don't know but what you're right; you look just as I want you to; I'm sorry I wasted good gold on this gim-crack, then," and he shut up the morocco-case with a sigh. "If there's anything you *would* like, in that line, I'll get 'em to exchange it to-morrow."

"Take me with you when you go, and I will see."

"Well, I will. Dinner's ready, an' so am I. I ain't set down to a square meal since we left New York. Come!"

"I wish we could have our meals in our room, Mr. Brant."

"Ashamed of me?" asked the man, quickly, with a sharp look which brought a blush of conscious guilt to the girl's pale cheeks. "I can't altogether blame you fur that. We ain't been brought up in the same school. I can tell you though, miss, before a year more goes over our heads there'll be hundreds of young ladies as high-flying as you that would give their right hands to call me their father. There's plenty, this minute, would like to be in your shoes. Don't you turn up your nose till you know what's in the bag. Come, I want my fodder."

He offered his arm with some show of gallantry, and they went down the broad staircase and on into the grand dining-room, whose various tables were half-filled by respectable-appearing people. There were many finely-dressed ladies and some gentlemen in the crowd of busy people.

Benjamin Brant purposely chose the center aisle, walking the whole length of it, before he would accept the seats proffered him by different servants.

Every eye followed the pair on their way up the room. It was not that they were so ill-assorted—that was seen often enough in the land of gold—but that Mercedes had that magnetic charm which is more powerful than beauty and fascinates the attention at first glance. Her dark eyes looked straight before her as she paced up the long room; the trailing black velvet clung to her supple, slender figure; her face was as pale and rich with hidden fire as some cream-white blossom that folds over a rose heart; her crown of glimmering hair, with its golden crimped fringe along her forehead, set off her dusky beauty strangely. She was so young, and yet it seemed as if she never smiled; for Mercedes was not now that joyous girl who had come down to her own rosebud dinner party with such glad anticipations of life. There was something haughty and repressed in the pale composure of her young face of which she was not herself aware; but her movements were those of polished grace; and the simple sumptuousness of her plain black dress was a lesson in the art of dressing to every lady who looked on her. The white rose in her bosom was not more perfectly a lovely rose than Mercedes was a lovely woman.

As Brant seated his daughter at the second table at the left hand, he bowed to some one sitting at the first, and then took his own seat with a feeling of quiet exultation that was excellent sauce to his appetite. If he had chosen that place knowing that William Alexander would see him as he came up, and notice his daughter, he had not been disappointed; the man *did* notice the young lady, flushing to the roots of his iron-gray hair with surprise and admiration.

"What's Brant doing with a girl like that?" he asked himself.

The waiters were very attentive to Mr. Alexander; he was evidently a person of some importance. Mr. Brant whispered to his daughter:

"Look straight ahead of you, at that fellow at the next table, with gray hair and black mustache. That's Bill Alexander—one o' the big-bugs of this country—worth millions, now, an' getting richer all the time; friend of mine, too. How do you like his looks?"

"I don't like them," was the direct answer, given after Mercedes had lifted her glorious, dusky eyes for a glance, *en passant*, at the person indicated.

"Sorry for that. Hope you'll change your mind. He's a friend o' mine. He's a widower, little gal, so mind your eye! They say he's a powerful admirer of the fair sex. Who knows, now, but my daughter, if she were sharp enough, might get to be mistress of his millions?"

"I'm not sharp enough; and it hurts me, sir, to hear such remarks from you. Please remember that I am a lady."

"As if *ladies* never set their caps fer rich men! They all do it—the best of 'em! I've seen dozens of 'em doing it in this very hotel! They're crazy after Bill Alexander. I was in hopes you would fancy him," in a disappointed tone. "He lives purty high, but he ain't a bad fellow, and you could take the shine off of every woman in Frisco without half tryin'."

Mercedes shivered inwardly, but made no reply. The public table was not the place to hold such a conversation. The one glance she had given the millionaire had prejudiced her against him forever. She had found him watching her with those greedy eyes which some men always fix on young and beautiful women—eyes, not so much of honest admiration as of gloating covetousness. His face was not otherwise repulsive. He was a handsome man of middle age; not forty, evidently, although the nervous strain of a life like his was bleaching his dark hair already. Something like a smiling sneer hovered about his lips under the shadow of his waxed mustache. His face was not very full, but his figure was beginning to grow heavy. He had the cool yet excited air of a gambler, though he only gambled in mining stocks; there was a rose in his button-hole, and a diamond as large as a hazel-nut on his little finger.

Mercedes, without as much as lifting a lash from her drooping eyes, knew that he watched her all through the many courses of the tiresome

dinner, and inwardly she grew angry and restless, while outwardly calm as some lily dreaming on its starlit pool.

As Ben Brant dropped four cubes of sugar in his *cafe noir* Mr. Alexander deserted his chair, coming over to their table and holding out his hand to the other man in a friendly way.

"When did you get back from the East?"

"To-day. Didn't stay long, did I? Only went to bring my daughter out. Her first visit to Frisco. Mr. Alexander, my daughter."

Mercedes nodded her royal head very slightly.

"Please do not introduce me to people in these public places," she said to her father, under her breath: but the "nabob" heard her and admired.

"His daughter!" he thought to himself, in astonishment. "This is indeed 'grapes out of thistles,' or however the good book has it!" Then aloud:

"Can I see you on business this evening, Brant?"

"Yes. Come to my parlor, No. 24, at seven o'clock. Want to see you."

The millionaire bowed as carelessly as the girl had done, and walked off down the room with a jaunty air.

"Didn't I tell you I was friends with all the big-bugs?" Brant whispered. "Now, child, you can be of some use to me, if you will. I'm bound to make a ten-strike this winter, and you can help me, if you will."

"How, sir?"

"I will give you a hint when we get upstairs," and having drained his cup to the last drop, he wiped his mouth with a sigh of satisfaction, and walked down the room as if he had been the Sultan of Persia.

For Ben Brant had much of a certain sort of sharpness, and was quick to see the profound impression made by his daughter. He knew, perfectly well, that half of the men at table were waiting, pretending to sip their coffee, until she glided back again through their ranks. The fact not only immensely pleased him, but he built a plan on it.

"I know just how them fellows feel—kinder overcome and awed, and yet in love with her beauty. Why, I'm her own father, an' yet she makes me treat her as if she were a princess! I can't get used to her. But I'll crow shanghai over Alexander now, you bet. If she ain't his wife in less'n three months you may take my hat! Don't like him, eh? That's only a girl's fancy. I'll overcome *that*. How the men's eyes follow her! 'Twas a lucky find when I went East for her. I hope she won't get homesick and mope, for that'll spile her good looks."

There was a large crowd hovering about the dining-room door when Brant and his daughter made their exit. When they reached their parlor Brant said:

"What I want you to do, daughter, ain't much. It is only to stop in the room this evening, when Alexander, and perhaps one or two others, come in. I don't call on you to talk or sing, or anything—just to set still. Here's the evening paper you can read."

"I'm weary, father. Why should I remain to hear you talk business?"

A cunning smile flickered over Brant's weather-tanned face.

Coarse as his own nature was, he already began to perceive that it would not do to allow his child—fine lady that she was—to see into his little plans. She would be sure to revolt, and who can manage a woman when she chooses to be obstinate?

Perhaps he had already alarmed her by saying too much! He must cover his tracks or the shy creature would never walk up to the snare.

"It's a new thing for me to have a daughter, an' I don't like her out of my sight; and some o' them fellows think it's all a sell about you anyways. I want 'em to see for themselves. Am I reasonable, girl?"

Mercedes could not reply except by a faint motion of the head. She took the paper he handed her and sat down by the little table. The window was open, for the day had been like one in May; but now the chill sea-fog came rolling in, and Brant closed the sash. He drew a chair not far from her, and, rolling his quid in his cheek, stared at her as if she had not yet ceased to be an object of intense curiosity and pleasure to him. Mercedes felt his gaze, but kept her own eyes glued to the paper. It was not long before a knock sounded on their door, and Alexander came in with another gentleman by the name of F——n, who was introduced to the young lady. Mercedes returned immediately to her newspaper, and the three men, drawing their chairs together, conversed in low

voices, earnestly. She heard enough to understand that they were talking about some new mines in Nevada—silver mines recently discovered—but such subjects had little interest for her, and her thoughts went back to that last night at home, and the pair of eager blue eyes which had made that evening a wonder and a rapture to her; the paper slipped from her hand, she forgot where she was, all that happened between that night and this.

Something startled her from her dream, and looking up, she found Mr. Alexander's eyes fixed full upon her with bold admiration, and a vivid blush swept over her beautiful face.

At this the gold-bug smiled meaningly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GOLD-BUG.

BRANT and his daughter remained two weeks at the hotel. He appeared somewhat different from at first; evidently made a great effort to appear "genteel," wore broadcloth instead of the rough garments in which he had hitherto seemed to take pleasure, with ruby studs in his white linen shirt-front; and was obsequiously devoted to his child. Every morning he took her out for a drive; their rooms were full of flowers; everything which mere money could purchase for her, she had. The weather was delicious, and this alone aided the poor girl to endure the unhappiness of her position. She despised her father, hated their hotel life, was sick of the admiration which dogged her every step. She felt utterly forlorn and friendless; her soul was embittered even toward her Aunt Esther, whom she had once idolized.

Brant had telegraphed to Miss Silverman of their safe arrival in San Francisco, with a request that his daughter's clothing and keepsakes should be sent there to the Palace Hotel; and one day a large trunk arrived, over which Mercedes shed scorching tears, as she took out of it articles, which, by their familiarity, called up old associations too vividly.

That evening she dressed for dinner in that sacred toilet which she had worn on her birthday—sacred to her now, from the memories it evoked; and as the creamy silk and tulle flowed about her, she experienced a feeling of safety and protection which stilled a nameless fear that now constantly troubled her.

"Let us have dinner here, father," she pleaded. "See! I am dressed too much for the public table. This was the dress I wore on my eighteenth birthday—the day—you—came."

"It becomes you even better than the black velvet one," he remarked approvingly. "You ain't a bit too much dressed. When you've got on your fanciest fixings is the time, I should say, to show yourself. But you shall have your way, Mercedes. I'll go down an' give the orders now."

Presently a couple of waiters came in to lay the table. The young lady placed in the center of it a fresh bouquet of the lovely roses which bloom in the outdoor air in March, in that climate. She had abstracted all the pink-and-amber tea-roses for her hair and dress; and she tried to imagine herself at home.

"Why do you lay the table for three, John?"

"Don't know, miss. Them was Mr. Brant's orders."

Then all the pleasure of the little feast was gone for Mercedes. She guessed, and rightly, that her father had invited a guest.

Five minutes before the turtle-soup came up, he brought Mr. Alexander into the room.

"To dine with us, my daughter. We will have a nice time all to ourselves," and Brant rubbed his palms together, pretending not to see the shadow that came over her face.

All the girl's high-breeding could not prevent that shadow. She was quite willing the two men should be conscious of it.

"I wish I had not worn this dress," she thought, knowing that she was looking her loveliest.

The paler, the colder, the haughtier she grew, the more the visitor admired her. She knew it, and could not help herself. The "nabob" had seen enough of smiling, willing women. The most potent charm of this one, after her beauty, was her utter indifference. She seated herself at table as if he were a creature who wearied her. He drank her health in exquisite dry champagne—she curled her rose-leaf lips disdainfully. He asked her what she thought of the city—of the country—the climate—the bay—the mountains—the flowers—if she were afraid of earthquakes? She did not like *anything* in California—she was afraid of earthquakes—she wished she were home in her own beautiful metropolis! Still he persevered in making himself polite to her, keeping up a one-sided conversation while the plates were changed and the corks were popped.

There was something in this man's presence which oppressed her; she drew a long breath of relief when, at the end of two hours, they arose from a dinner which Brant had made a banquet, with the pompous liberality of his class. But there was no escape for her yet. There was a piano in the room, and when the waiters had cleared away the feast, her father asked her to play. She preferred that to talking, and immediately obeyed, choosing some of Strauss's dreamy waltzes, and losing herself in thoughts of when and where she had last floated to their soft-beating measure.

Suddenly she came to a stop, looking about her nervously. Her father had slipped out of the room. She was alone with Mr. Alexander, who was leaning at one end of the piano, gazing at her with steady, hateful eyes. He came around to her side, trying to seize one of the small hands, which she haughtily withdrew.

"Miss Brant, do not be so cold, so forbidding! I have your father's approval of my suit. He has granted me permission to ask you to be my wife. I did not think to marry again, but I have been wild since the hour I first met you. You suit me to a T. I like your style. Why should we not increase each other's happiness by marriage? You know, I presume, that I have plenty of money—that I am one of the gold-bugs of this city. You shall have everything your heart craves. You will be the envy of all the women in this country. I shall be free-handed and indulgent with you. Come! my sweet girl, say that you and I shall soon be one!"

He bent over her shoulder; his warm breath was on her cheek; his persuasive whisper on her shrinking ear.

She slipped off from the piano-stool and confronted him, her slim figure drawn up, her eyes flashing, her cheeks flushing scarlet.

"How dare you speak to me so, sir? You know that I don't care for you."

"But you can learn to care for me," he continued, smilingly. "That will come after we are married. I can teach you to love me, my beauty."

"You are mistaken about that. Your vanity leads you astray," she answered him, with chilling scorn.

The millionaire was astonished. It was a novel thing for him to be made to feel that neither himself nor his gold was prized. He eyed the young lady doubtfully. Her beauty and youth seemed all the more desirable and fascinating because they were "above the market"—because his millions could not buy them. A dangerous fire leaped into his eyes.

"Come, now, be reasonable," he said. "I am not a bad man. Your father approves of me." Then, with a sudden blaze of jealousy: "You are too young to make it likely that your feelings are already engaged—that you have a lover?"

"I have no lover, Mr. Alexander. I am free as air. And I intend to remain so. My father has not the shadow of a right to force my inclinations—to assert any authority over me. I never saw him until a fortnight ago. I owe him nothing—but my misery."

"Ah! I know. I was somewhat acquainted with Ben Brant when he sailed under the cognomen of 'Unlucky Jo.' I wonder at his having such a daughter, I must confess. He says he left you with a rich aunt when he came out here; I suppose that is so. We are good friends, though, he and I; and I have it in my power to help him. Don't be cross and scornful with me, beautiful Mercedes! I am terribly in love with you—no sham! I shall be tempted to blow out my brains if I can't coax you so say 'yes.' Come! You shall not answer me to-night. Think it over. I won't press you too hardly until you have had time to make up your mind. I shall live in the hope that you will soon alter it."

"Never! never!"

"I shall 'not take 'no' for an answer.' Faint heart never won fair lady.' All I ask is fair play. I am quite certain you will conclude to marry me some day. I will not worry you any more about it to-night. But I shall bring up the subject soon again. I like you all the better for not falling into my arms at the first invitation. Nevertheless, I have made up my mind to marry you, and it's this will of mine that has made me what I am. Well, good-night, and sweet dreams, my lady! I have had a delightful evening, and hope soon to come again. Adios."

Mercedes stood quite quiet after he had softly closed the door between him and herself. A strange, creeping fear stole over her proud spirit. There was a calm determination about the man which impressed her, in spite of her own imperious strength of character.

He had made up his mind to marry her! She tried to laugh his assurance to scorn, but there was a chill stealing over her being, as still and pervading as the cold white fog that wrapped the city in its embrace.

Pretty soon her father came in; his face was flushed and hard.

"Bill Alexander tells me you have given him the mitten."

"He should not have asked for it if he did not want it."

"You're a plaguey queer girl, Mercedes! You hold that pretty head of yours deuced high, when you turn up your nose at millions!—likely to be doubled 'fore the end o' another year, if I know how to read signs. What in blazes will satisfy you? Ain't he handsome, a good figure, a man in his prime, a favorite with the ladies—and a gold-bug? What more do you want, little fool?"

It was the first time he had spoken harshly to her, and her heart beat as if it would burst her breast; but she kept down her tears.

"Did you bring me out here to sell me to some rich man, father? I thought perhaps you needed me—longed for your child—and I hoped to be able, some time, to love you, strange as you are. You will make me *detest* you if you don't quit showing me off and offering me to the highest bidder. Look out! I will run away."

He stared into the young, pale face. Her eyes defied him.

"Softly, softly, daughter," he said, prudently. "You are all off the track. The man fell head-over-ears in love with you the first time he saw you. Am I to blame for that? My heart is sot on your marrying him; but I'm not going to drive you. You'll have your own way, I reckon. I might 'a' told that by the cut of your jib. We'll drop the matter square off here."

"And now news has come from there that'll take me to Nevada fur pretty much all summer. It's a rough place I'm going to, right out amongst some new mines. I'll have to live in a shanty and take pot-luck as well as my men. Will you go there along with me? Or, shall I find you a nice boarding-house in Frisco and leave you, safe an' quiet, till I get back here?"

"Where will Mr. Alexander be?"

"In Frisco."

"Then I choose to go with you, Mr. Brant, if you will take me."

"Very well. I sha'n't object to your company. You'll find it rough work, camping out in the hills. But you've got grit; an' they do say it's healthy there. There's an Injun woman I always take out to do my cooking. You can have a lady's-maid, too, if you want one—ha, ha, ha! And as much finery as two or three mules can carry; I won't stint you, girl! I'd like, right well to have you with me; I've kinder got used to you already. But it's my advice to you to stay here in Frisco, safe and comfortable."

"I would a thousand times prefer to go with you, father."

"Then go with me you shall!" answered Ben Brant, hiding a smile, which, if Mercedes had seen it, would have made her still more uneasy.

CHAPTER VII.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.

WHEN Alexander left the proud daughter of rough Ben Brant, more mortified and offended than he chose to let her know, he said a few words to her father in the lower hall, indicating how his proposal had been received, and then passed out of the hotel onto the pavement, where he walked up and down, smoking a cigar whose delicate nepenthe soothed his irritated self-love.

"By the great scissors!" he commented to himself, "she's just the woman to cut a grand splurge with the money I would give her! She would bear any amount of diamonds, and yet outshine them all! And the airs that come so natural to her, wouldn't they be just the thing for my wife? I shall not give her up for one rebuff! I'm getting interested. By George, if I didn't know it was impossible, I should say I was in love! I never saw a woman who took me so completely. Brant wants me to go in partnership with him in buying that mine from the poor cuss who discovered it. It's a big thing!—a big thing! I'm convinced of it. But I shall make his daughter's hand the bonus I am to be paid for going into it. What! Maraquita? Where the devil did you come from?"

He had walked on in the excitement of his thoughts, two or three blocks from the hotel, and his by no means amiable inquiries were addressed to a woman who had been timidly following him, and now advanced, laying her finger on his arm to arrest his attention.

"Mother has gone to see Ben Brant about

going up to camp with him for the summer, and I was waiting for her, when I saw you come out of the hotel. It is weeks since you came to see me, *mio caro*. Time passes like a funeral procession—slow—slow."

"I'm very busy these days, Maraquita. I don't have so much time for love-making as I used. You must learn not to look for me. 'Those who expect nothing will not be disappointed,' you know."

The light of a street-lamp was full on her face as he said this, and he saw the quick tears rush into her large, liquid black eyes; but they only vexed him, for he was tired of her. She was a beautiful creature. Her complexion was a warm olive, her hair straight, black and silky, her figure small and supple. There was fire in her eyes and passion in her small, arched mouth.

Once, Alexander had found in this young creature his ideal of womanly witchery, poor and uneducated and without "style" as she was. But, with every ten thousand dollars which he marked on the notched stick of his sudden fortune, she grew to please him less, poor girl! He was a poor adventurer, picking up the sweepings of other men's gold, when his wife died; Maraquita, the daughter, pretty and helpful, of the Spanish woman with whom he found a home, was good enough for him then—only three or four years ago; and the girl who clung to his arm there on the pavement, and looked up at him with swimming eyes, was not now more than twenty.

"You are cruel, Bill," she said, drawing away from him as if he had struck her. "You hurt me here," placing her hand on her heart with the unconscious gesture of a natural actress, "and you do not care."

"Oh, yes, I do care! I'm very fond of you still, little one. I don't mean to forget you. You shall never want for anything money can buy so long as I live. Did I not tell you to marry Diego, and I would buy you a pretty house and fit it up to your taste, and get him a good place to earn money in?"

"You know that I will never marry Diego," indignantly.

"Then you are indeed a little fool. He follows you around like a dog; he is so devoted to you that you can twist him around your little finger. You ought to marry him and settle down, Maraquita."

"So! that is the way you talk to me? Very well. But I shall not marry Diego. It is a great thing to get rich and be a gentleman!"

"Don't be sarcastic, little one! If you keep your temper, and do not bother me at the wrong time, I shall be good to you. I intended going to visit you before long, and have a little present here in my pocket now, that I bought for you—a bracelet, with real diamonds. Take it, Maraquita, and go home and be a good girl till I find it convenient to come to see you."

She would not take the little parcel he attempted to place in her hand. Her black eyes flashed through their tears, her lips quivered as much with anger as sorrow; she turned her back upon him.

At that minute an elderly woman came up, nodding to Alexander, saying as she passed:

"Come home with me, daughter. Brant is off to-morrow, and I am to keep his cabin for him. Come home, and finish my aprons—I shall require them."

"Am I to go with you, mother?"

"*Dios sabe!* I think not. 'Tis no place for you. Come!"

"Adios, Katinka; good luck go with you! By-by, little one. I hope you will not be so cross next time we meet," and Alexander, turning lightly on his heel, walked back to the hotel.

"He is a serpent, mother," said the girl, bitterly.

"No, my child; he is only a man. When you say that you say all that is bad. Do not fret about him! We have lost him. 'To shave an ass is a waste of lather.' Diego will make you a good husband, daughter; you must try to smile when he looks in your eyes. I wish you were to be up in the mountains with me. Very well, then! I have an idea! What do you think? Ben Brant has brought a young woman he calls his daughter. She is going to the mines with him, and she is not used to wait upon herself. If you like, I will ask her to take you as her maid, Maraquita. Then you and I will be together."

"What is she like, mother?"

"She is a very great lady, I tell you that. Not as old as you, child, and beautiful as our dreams of angels. I believe Bill Alexander is sweet upon her. I heard him say something to her father about getting the mitten."

The smoldering fire in Maraquita's eyes blazed up again.

"I would like to be her attendant, mother. Get me the place, if you can."

Ben Brant had called Katinka an "Injun" in speaking to his daughter; but if there was any Indian blood in her at all, it was not predominant. She was a Spanish-Mexican by birth; an old hag, now, who had once been a pretty girl; with only a pair of keen dark eyes looking out of her parchment face to tell of charms long withered, though blooming again in her beautiful child.

Her skin was as brown and wrinkled as a last-year's leaf; but she was tall, and appeared to be strong enough yet for the service she engaged to do—cook for Brant and his daughter and keep their hut or tent for them. She was reputed to be the best camp-cook "that side of the Rockies;" with the useful accomplishment of getting up a savory meal out of very small supplies.

She had been with Brant several times before and was quite ready to set out again; since the Indian taint, or strain rather, in her veins, gave her a particular fondness for the wild, free life of the mines.

Katinka saw that her daughter was not in good spirits, and knew the cause; but, after roughly advising her not to "cry over spilt milk," took no notice of the girl's depression.

The next morning she saw Brant about Maraquita's going with them as personal attendant on Miss Brant. Ben was pleased with the idea, thinking it would render the hard life in the hills more endurable to Mercedes; and the arrangement was quickly made.

In a few weeks from that night of the birthday dinner, with its roses, its feastings, its luxury, Mercedes ate her first camp-supper, under a patched tent, looking out of whose open door she could see only the bleak Nevada hills towering on every side—sheer abysses, craggy battlements, leaping cascades wavering down from awful heights, dead, and changed to ghosts of waterfalls before their dizzy leap was half accomplished.

The place was so wild, so desolate in its bare grandeur; her life such an utter change from that refined dream of soft indulgence in which her days had been spent; she was so reft away from all her friends and associates, seeing never a familiar face, but only new and unloved ones, that many and many a time she wrung her little tense hands together with the belief that, if she could only struggle into wakefulness, she would find this new life but a dream. Such delusions were only momentary.

On their journey, by mule-back, up into the mountains, after they had left the railroad and civilization behind, she made the acquaintance of Katinka and her handsome daughter. It was a great comfort to Mercedes to have one of her own sex and age for a servant and companion; she thanked her father more than once for thinking of it.

Maraquita could dress the wonderful golden hair of her young mistress with as much taste as Rosine once did it; she was quick and intelligent; knew how to do all the little services required in traveling through a rough country; and after they had reached their destination, was invaluable as a companion as well as attendant to the young lady placed alone in a mining-camp made up of fifty or sixty reckless fellows whom her father had hired, and who were only kept in half-order by the knowledge that Ben Brant "would stand no nonsense."

The rainy season was well over; even up in the mountains as high as they went; the weather was cool and bracing, but not too cold; the tent was sufficient shelter for sleep; the sun was warm through the day, and each night a couple of brisk fires kindled on the rocky plateau on which they were encamped were pleasant to sit by, and marvelously picturesque in their effect.

It was a strange life! And a strange fate which sent this delicate flower of civilization so awell with this barbarous horde! Stranger even to her than to any one else!

Ben Brant, before leaving Frisco, had given his daughter a small revolver—an elegant toy of pearl and gold, but none the less deadly on that account—and taught her how to use it. Every day, out there in the hills, she practiced shooting at a mark until her aim was acknowledged by "the boys" to be surprising. Maraquita made herself a bow and plenty of arrows.

Mercedes admired the girl, soon becoming warmly attached to her, and trying, with friendly sympathy, to know why the great, lustrous eyes were so melancholy. But Maraquita was not communicative in anything which touched herself.

They had been about a fortnight in their

camp; Brant was very busy and very much elated over his prospects; the men were good workers; and Mercedes was congratulating herself on having left San Francisco and come to this solitude which best befitted her feelings, when, at the close of a hot day, a mule was seen in the distance scrambling up the narrow path by which alone camp could be reached, and Brant, using a glass, soon called out:

"Bill Alexander! Just as I expected!"

"Oh, father!" murmured Mercedes, reproachfully.

She did not notice how the brown cheeks of Maraquita flushed and paled.

"He had to come, child. We couldn't have bought the Josephine Mines if he hadn't helped. He and I have the whole thing in our own hands, now we've bought off the poor cuss who discovered it. Why! I tell you, sis, the silver just lays in solid beds, miles long! There never was anything like it before. I expect you'll be the greatest heiress in the country before we're done with this! Alexander's come up to see about putting the stock on the market. He tends to that part."

"Hello, Bill! So you're here, are you? Something of a climb, ain't it? One of the grandest places in the world! And got more'n its share of the good stuff, too. Why, blazes! it's enough to make your hair rise on your head! That poor devil that sold out his claim for two hundred thousand, cash down, hadn't any idea of its value! I s'pose he's happy, though. I'm pretty certain we have reason to be! How are you, anyhow?"

"A little banged-up. This mule's an infernal creature. Obstinate as a woman," answered Alexander, whose eyes had rested on the beautiful face of the girl he was determined to win for his wife, and who had not yet condescended to turn and speak to him.

He regarded her with a bold, half-sneering smile as if certain of her, for all her impertinent pride; but his look changed when he noticed what girl it was playing the part of attendant to Miss Brant. His color fled and he bit his lips.

Maraquita, usually shy and anxious to please him, stared straight at him with a peculiar expression in her eyes which had been to him only gentle and passionately-loving. It seemed to him that she threatened him with that look—or, at least, defied him.

"Curse it!" he said to Brant, in an undertone.

"Why did you bring that girl out here? She'll make trouble. Didn't you know she is sweet on me?—and jealous as the deuce! Look out, or she'll up and murder your handsome daughter! That sort of women don't stop at trifles."

"Hello!" responded Brant, in the same undertone. "Is that so? I knew nothing about it."

"Yes; Maraquita is an old sweetheart of mine, who don't seem to be able to understand when a man gets tired of her. She'll set your daughter against me, if she does nothing worse. You gave me away, Brant, when you brought her out here."

"I'm sorry; but you can't expect me to keep track of your love affairs. I'll see what can be done; we'll talk about it by-and-by. Mercedes, don't you see Mr. Alexander?"

Mercedes turned slowly and gave the new arrival a bow so cold and careless that the blood flamed up into his dark face with suppressed anger.

"Keety," said Brant—Keety was his abbreviation of the girl's name—"tell your mother to set a plate for our guest. You're tired and hungry, Alexander; but 'tis nearly supper-time. Daughter, can't you speak to a gentleman when he has come clear from Frisco to see you?"

The Spanish girl, lingering, heard the vexed question which Brant asked his child. She grew pale about the mouth while scarlet streaks shot up into her cheeks, and her great black eyes fairly flashed lightning. Then her black eyebrows drew together with a scowl and she gritted her little white teeth together, muttering to herself; but her back was turned on the group on the rock and none noticed her strange expression.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HASN'T THE SUITOR GOT MONEY?"

MARAQUITA, with clenched hands and quivering lips, went on into the tent where old Katinka was preparing supper.

The place was large for a tent. One quarter of it was divided off by a curtain for Miss Brant's bedroom; the remaining space was crowded enough; but it had to do until the little cabin of small pine logs, laid up with the bark on, could be completed.

Katinka did not cook in the tent, she only kept her materials there, under shelter. Out on

the rocks, a rod or so away, a fire was crackling and crumbling into coals, and against its red background stood out the plump pot and the slender tin vessels in which the coffee was boiling. There was a bake-kettle, with crimson coals piled on the iron cover, where biscuits were browning, and a frying-pan where something agreeably odorous was sizzling. Between the fire and the tent a rough table—made of some slabs of wood laid on the stumps of four small pines which had been cut for the cabin—stood, out in the crisp, pleasant, spicy air. A white cloth was spread neatly over it, and the firelight, when it leaped up, played over silver forks and spoons, no doubt brought as a concession to the fastidious tastes of the young lady.

Mercedes, glancing casually at the white tent, the rude table, the lovely fantastic fire, and inhaling the fragrance of the coffee mingled with the pungent odor of the pines, admitted to herself that, for a picnic or a brief summer excursion, such a place and such surroundings would be enchanting.

But the loud laughing and hoarse songs coming faintly from that other camp-fire around which the miners were gathered, along with the consciousness of who it was who sat there talking in low tones with her father, made her shrink into herself. For a delicate, high-bred girl who had—

"Lain in the lilies and fed on the roses of life,"

it was a singular situation to be held in; yet, with friends to share it, it would have had its charms.

As it was, she felt forlorn and helpless. She could not persuade herself that this new, rough man she was forced to call father, was really her friend. Not so long as he leagued against her with this hateful, insolent Alexander. Was he not doing it now? Had he not deceived her in getting her out here in the hills of Nevada, knowing that she believed she was going far away from this unwelcome suitor? Mercedes was very angry with her father.

Meantime, Maraquita, far angrier than her young mistress, went into the tent to do Brant's bidding.

"Mother, you are told to set another plate. Bill Alexander is here!"

Something in the sharp voice of the girl made the brown and wrinkled old woman turn her shrewd eyes on her daughter, while she beat away steadily at the batter she was preparing.

"What's that to you, little one? Does it put you out of temper?"

The flash of Maraquita's eyes were sufficient answer.

"You are a foolish girl," went on the old woman, quietly. "Why do you fret when fretting will do no good? Hold your peace! We are doing well. We shall make much money out of these people; and a bolder, handsomer young fellow than Diego does not walk the world. He has come up here in the mines for the sake of being with you. His heart is bound up in you. What more do you want? Let me tell you one thing, 'water that has run by, will turn no mill.' If Bill Alexander has got tired o' you he ain't a-going to turn back on his track. Let him alone. That young lady out there is the one to be his wife. A splendid beauty! Not that she's handsomer than my Maraquita!—but she has an air about her that would confer a favor on Bill's millions. 'Patience, and shuffle the cards,' my daughter."

"Mother, it is easy to talk. I don't want to make money out of Bill. I scorn his presents, for they are nothing but bribes for me to keep quiet. I'll make trouble for him, though!"

There was much more of a threat in her looks than in her words.

"Drop it, daughter, drop it; 'twill do no good to thee, be sure. Revenge is sweet, but it eats the eater. Let it go. Cheap wine is not for the jeweled goblet. What are you but the old cook's daughter! Remember that. Bestir thee, now, and help me a bit. See to the extra plate, for my tomato-sauce is scorching. Heugh! I smell it," and Katinka ran to rescue her skillet from the fire.

In five minutes more supper was announced. The gold-bug, who had been talking business with his host, arose, gallantly offering his arm to Mercedes; but she, with the peachy bloom deepening on her velvet cheeks, did not seem to see him, walking on by herself.

"A deuced impertinent aristocrat!" muttered Alexander. It was not often that he met with a rebuff in these days of his prosperity; perhaps the troubled, forlorn girl, had she but realized how it strengthened his resolve to make her his own when he suffered mortification from

her slights, would have treated him more deferentially.

But, Mercedes was half-wild with a fear that she was being circumvented by those two men.

Maraquita waited at table.

A scene more picturesque and altogether surprising—had there been any artist eye to look upon it unexpectedly—could hardly have been seen, even in that country of wonders. The spot occupied by the mining party was isolated from the rest of the world by a cordon of mighty hills. The plateau was not of itself of great altitude, but it was shut in by rugged mountains. Fifty feet below a swift stream tore through a rugged canyon, and over the plateau rushed a furious brook which had tumbled from heights above, forming a basin—like a sudden, silent thought that comes in the hurry and fret of life—sweet, cool and tranquil, where it rested and dreamed before plunging onward again on its restless way. To the west, the crowding hills opened wide, giving an outlook into the valleys and plains; and at this sunset hour the opening was like a golden gate, for far away, the red sunset burned above the level land.

To this sunset, the dreamy eyes of Mercedes turned, while the two men chatted on and on about the smelting-works to be erected just below—how a wagon track could be made to the works—how the men were taking out so much ore that the prospect was too dazzling to be talked of, almost—and how the smelting must begin as soon as possible.

The young lady—herself the greatest surprise of all, sitting there in that wild place, with her reserved expression, her fashionable toilet, her refined and glorious beauty—and the handsome, sullen girl who stood behind her chair, which chair was a camp-stool, were both in strong contrast to the place and the party. The camp-fire threw flickering lights and shadows, as the sunset faded, over the table, the pine woods, the two men's faces, as they talked and talked, the lovely, pale, proud face of Mercedes, the flashing eyes of her attendant, and the bent form of old Katinka hanging over her kettles as if she were one of Macbeth's witches stirring up some baleful broth.

Not once did the covetous eye of the guest wander away from his host's lips to dwell with a sort of exultation on the supple, slim figure, the white hand, the gold hair of the girl he had determined should be his wife, but Maraquita took note of it, while her nails clenched her palms, and the smoldering blaze shone in her big, black eyes.

The girl was quite sharp enough to see, too, this first time that she observed the two together, that Miss Brant detested her lover. This discovery worked a certain change in the purpose she had already formed—for a purpose, dark and deadly, had taken life and shape in that torrid nature.

Ignorant and passionate, the one only thing to be done, according to Maraquita's code, in return for the treason of the man who had won her, was to have revenge. She did not reason; she only felt. Nothing had ever governed her but her emotions; so they governed her still.

Once, by chance, Alexander's glance met her burning gaze, and his heart gave a sudden throb of fear; the next moment he laughed at himself and thought:

"I must buy her off—right away. I don't mind a few thousands only so the girl is satisfied. I will speak to her by-and-by."

He remembered this resolution after he had left the table.

The night was so perfectly clear and dewless that the people remained out-of-doors. Mercedes, with a filmy shawl thrown over her head and shoulders looked a hundred times lovelier than ever, with the white light of the moon on her face and shining like fire in her dark, dreamy eyes. Her father took great trouble to explain to her how much it would cost to build the smelting-works, open the mines as they should be opened, get the silver to market in portable shape; also, the skill and *finesse* necessary to get up the shares and sell them, when they wished to do it: "but," he added, "we will not sell a single share until we are ready. When we do they will be worth two hundred cents on the dollar at the very first jump."

"So you see, we have got a BIG thing! If you marry Alexander you will be his heir as well as mine. You will be one of the richest women in the world. If you don't marry him, the whole thing will fall through, as far as I'm concerned. I ain't got but a couple o' hundred thousand to aid in developing the mine; an' Bill swears high and low, up and down, he won't help me a dollar, unless you promise to marry him."

"Why don't you get some other man, then, father? If these mines are what you say they are, any capitalist would be glad to go in with you."

"Yes, an' take the lion's share! Bill Alexander promises to divide *even*—he half and I half of all that's made—if you will marry him. Was you engaged to anybody down East, the reason you're so offish?" he asked, with a suspicious look at his daughter's fair face.

"No, father."

"Then I can't understand it! Half the unmarried ladies in Frisco are wild after Bill. Hasn't he got style? Hasn't he got manners? Don't he know how to handle his silver fork? Is he good-looking? Isn't he liberal with his money? Get out! It's my opinion, girl, that you're holding off just to vex and bother me."

Her proud lip quivered; her heart shrunk and trembled. What could she say to this coarse man who exercised the rights of a father? How could she explain to him that she loathed men of the stamp of this Alexander? That she would prefer a crust of bread and a calico frock and solitude all her life long, rather than minister to the vanity and pleasure of that man with all his millions at her service?

"You must make up your mind, once for all, to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes. The whole speculation is hanging fire, because an obstinate girl can't make up her mind to say 'yes.' Things has got to go on. I hope you'll be reasonable, Mercedes. It all depends on you."

He spoke in that dogged tone, which tells more than any other of a deep-laid resolution that can never be stirred. He rose from his camp-stool, pulled his hat down over his brows, and walked away. Every motion expressed a settled resolution.

Mercedes looked after him in alarm. It was the first time she had seen this man, Ben Brant—who by some strange and tragic turn of Fortune's wheel had appeared before her as her father and torn her from her past life with a hand of steel, chaining her to him by that tie of blood—with his energies aroused and his iron purpose fixed. It was enough to make her heart stand still in her panting bosom.

She felt like a prisoner—a slave. What would he do with her? She bitterly regretted having consented to come with him to the mountains. She was now utterly in his power. She could not even run away.

True, his words had not been savage; but there was a threat in the very quietness of his resolute voice. She realized the fearful temptation under which he labored. Rude and fierce as his nature was, she did not wonder that he thought her objection to Mr. Alexander a mere girl's whim.

Before leaving San Francisco she had received a letter from her aunt Esther announcing her intention of sailing for Europe.

Mercedes—the petted, the lovely, the belle of that rosebud dinner, but a few weeks since—appeared to herself, that night, the most desolate, the most forsaken, the most unhappy creature that ever lived.

Mr. Alexander, shortly after supper, had gone in search of Maraquita. Not finding her he spoke to her mother, who was washing dishes by the light of a flaring pine torch.

"I reckon the girl's with Diego," answered Katinka.

"He's a gallant of hers, is he not?"

"He would like to be, I dare say. I wish she would take up with him. He kisses the ground she walks on. And I'm sick of these big-bug lovers with their lies and their promises. 'Too sweet words leave a bitter taste.' You haven't treated my daughter any too well, Bill Alexander! I warn you to look out for yourself. Keety's got a temper like honey and gunpowder mixed. You've had the honey, now look out for the powder."

"Tut, tut, Katinka; why are you and she getting into these tantrums? I'm just what I always was—a good fellow so long as you keep on the right side of me. If Keety will marry Diego I don't mind promising them a snug little house in Frisco and a wedding dot big enough to set him up in any kind of business he prefers. I'm sure that's good of me. And here's a little something to buy the wedding dress."

He threw a buckskin purse on the table, causing the gold in it to ring with a mellow sound.

A little brown hand snatched it from the boards and hurled it into the heart of the camp-fire!

"If Diego ever marries me," said a voice in his ear, "'twill be because he has first promised me to put you out of the way!"

CHAPTER IX.

"A SOUL'S TRAGEDY."

It was April, that month of smiles and tears, of pink apple-blossoms and gorgeous tulips and fleecy clouds and sudden bursts of sunshine—April in the meadows, April in the woods—but not April in Esther Silverman's heart, as she packed, with Rosine's aid, a couple of trunks, preparatory to setting out across the seas for Paris.

Two powerful motives urged her to flight—the first, to get rid of the numb aching of her own heart and brain; the other to be free from the constant questioning of friends as to what had become of her niece.

Esther looked as if she needed the voyage and the change of scene. Handsome and stately still, there were hollows coming about her eyes, and more than one silver thread in the dusky hair which had always been her pride. Ill-health was her excuse to others for shutting up her fine establishment and going abroad.

It was not necessary to tell the inquisitive that it was ill-health of the mind rather than of the body.

Who suspected a skeleton in Miss Silverman's closet?

Who inferred that there was canker at the heart of Miss Silverman's roses?

Who guessed at the phantom which haunted the house of her heart?

No one. Esther Silverman stood as the embodiment of brilliant success—the one woman without care, sorrow, or loss—the happy person in whom were united wit and beauty, and who had wealth to carry out her projects of enjoyment.

The world did not know that on a few pages of the book of her life was written down a dark story; that the full sunshine in which she lived only made blacker the shadow behind her.

She knew it. After the blow had fallen for which she had waited with fear and trembling through many long years, her soul lay writhing and prostrate under it; but she kept as brave a countenance as possible, finally deciding to hide her troubles in that gay and distant city which is bright enough and large enough to hold more than one breaking heart or uneasy conscience without giving sign.

Shall we read those few sealed pages in the book of Esther Silverman's life?

We come upon the record early—at the beginning of the sixteenth year.

Horatio Silverman, Esther's father, was a proud man, occupying a proud position, when she and her twin sister, Sibyl, were children.

He was a man of inherited wealth, a prominent lawyer, who had become a judge in the Supreme Court, whose opinions were held in high esteem, and who, socially, professionally, and morally, was looked up to as a shining light. A born aristocrat, of rather a cold and haughty temperament, the early death of his beautiful wife increased his natural reserve.

Many a belle would have been honored in winning his love, but he never married again. His domestic pride and affection were centered on the two sweet little girls for whose life his darling had paid the price of her own.

The judge's mother—still a well-preserved old lady, from whose masculine strength of character her son had inherited his peculiarities—presided over the household.

Stateliness and elegance reigned in that home; etiquette was strictly observed; money was spent in a grand way; but Love hid his diminished head. Unless over the shoulder of some merry French nurse, the little archer never peeped at the two pretty creatures who went hand in hand through their formal childhood. The judge adored his children; he was intensely proud of them; they were two of the most exquisite fairies that ever grew in mortal home; but he did not know how to pet and caress them. The stately grandmother overlooked their nurses, their waiting-maids, their governess.

Esther and Sibyl were like their lost mother, warm-hearted little things, overflowing with ardent impulses; and for these they were always being checked and reprov'd by grandmamma.

When they were fifteen, governess and masters were dismissed, and they were allowed to attend Madame De M——'s finishing school for young ladies, as day scholars, the establishment being but a few blocks from the judge's residence.

Here the two girls enjoyed themselves immensely in the midst of company of their own age, for they had been brought up like little nuns. They were so very pretty and amiable

that every one liked them. They had now more than enough flattery.

Months passed pleasantly away. The remarkable beauty of Judge Silverman's twin daughters was much talked of, in and out of the school.

At sixteen they were, indeed, a pair worth going far to see. Innocent as seraphs, graceful as sylphs, with wavy, thick, silken dark hair, lovely, long-lashed dark eyes, clear, brunette complexions, just of a height, dressed precisely alike, every eye in the vicinity followed them wherever they moved.

Unknown to Madame de M——, and unsuspected by the haughty old grandmother—whose hair would have risen on her head in holy horror at the mere idea—it got to be the habit with some idle young fellows to hover about the corner for a glimpse of the twin beauties on their way to and from school.

An elderly woman always *chaperoned* them, walking primly, in starched cap and black silk dress, just behind her youthful charges; but this only made the young men more mischievously inclined. With the most of them, the fun was innocent enough. But these girls were rich! In the great city there were adventurers who made it their business to get up a private directory with the names inscribed therein of marriageable ladies with fortunes.

Then, too, was there ever a girl's school without one "black sheep?" Elize H. was the "black sheep" of Madame De M——'s establishment. The madame knew it; but her haughty pupil belonged to a rich and influential family; and though convicted, over and over, not only of flirting on the street, exchanging notes with young men, but also of "kleptomania," the teacher did not venture to expel her. Elize was very charming when she tried to be; she was so opposite to all they had ever seen, that Esther and Sibyl fell violently in love with her, school-girl fashion, and then—she led the innocents into mischief.

She contrived to introduce to them two young men, favorites of her own. The next step was to get the twin-sisters to visit at her house. By this time their grandmother was growing feeble; she was confined to her room with a long illness; the judge did not refuse his daughters when they asked if they might visit Elize H. He knew nothing about Elize; he only knew that Mr. H. was an eminent member of a highly respectable firm.

As for Elize, she was a spoiled child; she did as she pleased at home, and made acquaintances in all directions.

She would inform these two young men when Esther and Sibyl were coming to spend an evening; and the whole party would go off to walk, while, more than once, they attended the theater without the knowledge of either family.

To the twins, these were glimpses of fairy life. All at home was sad and prim; Elize, and her ways and her friends, were delightful.

One of the young men was the dissipated son of a wealthy merchant, twenty years of age, handsome, brilliant, dashing—in the eyes of an inexperienced girl, the prince of beauty and grace. To Tom Cleveland, Esther was quickly "engaged." She was wretched because he would not allow her to tell her father; but his word was law and gospel to her, and Tom had explained that "the judge had an unreasonable prejudice against him." As Esther knew her father had strong prejudices this seemed natural and a good excuse.

The other person, to whom Sibyl likewise became secretly engaged, was several years older than Tom, and was only known to any one in the city as a hanger-on to young Cleveland's skirts.

He was a Spaniard, with a dark, romantic style of beauty which fascinated Sibyl. To her he was the embodiment of her girlish dreams of chivalry. She sometimes noticed him astray in his grammar, but she accounted for that in the fact that he was a foreigner. Antonio Delgado was, in her eyes, the dark-eyed hero of poetry and romance. She saw him, not as he was, but as he should be—a graceful Cid, lord of lemon-groves and vineyards on the banks of

"The gleaming Guadalquivir."

And so, the fatal charm was woven, while the old grandmother lay on her dying bed and the stately father presided over his court.

The proud old lady faded and died, happily, without knowing that the two maidens she had fenced about with cold restrictions actually were married, one to a weak victim of temptation, the other to a deliberate scoundrel; secretly married, at a little over sixteen, to men whom their father would not have allowed to cross his threshold.

Elize, urged by the very spirit of wickedness, had coaxed, urged, persuaded—dwelling on the delightful romance, the bewitching mystery of a secret marriage. The very ignorance of the world in which the twins had been kept made them the more easily a prey to these adventurers. Tom was really in love with Esther, as well as driven half-distracted by gambling debts into which he had stumbled by Antonio's kind aid. Delgado was nothing more nor less than a professional gambler from New Orleans, of Spanish descent, perhaps, but of the lowest. He was after the judge's money. He knew, full well, the price that proud man would pay to free his daughter from *such* bonds.

Meantime, not a word of the pitiful romance had got beyond the actors. Esther, the hour she had found herself Tom's wife, had bitterly repented her folly. In an agony of remorse, and fear of her father's anger, she had hastened home; and thereafter, passionately as she loved Tom, utterly refused to see or speak with him, begging him, by letter, to wait one year, and then try to persuade her parent to consent formally to their union. She had always plenty of will, and she kept to her resolution.

But Sibyl, weakly fond and foolishly romantic, refused her advice, upbraided her with deserting Tom, and clung to her husband devotedly. Of course they could meet but seldom; whenever they did she took him all the money she could get together; and as her grandmother had left each of the girls a little present of a few thousand dollars apiece, this was considerable, and served to keep him quiet.

Too late Esther's eyes were opened. She began to comprehend not only that she was bound to a weak, dissipated young scamp in every way unworthy of her, but that her darling sister was the wife of a vulgar scoundrel who only wanted her money.

An indescribable horror of the hour when her dignified father should discover his children's perfidy, took possession of her. She could hardly eat or sleep; she wasted away to a mere shadow of her once fresh loveliness; the family physician was consulted, but could not discover her disease; in July the judge took his daughters to the seaside for Esther's health.

Before they left the city Esther had a brief interview with Tom, and got his promise to keep their unhappy secret during her absence. Many a time she would have, before this, gone to her father, told him all, and begged him to procure for her a legal release from her folly; but Sibyl's refusal to give up Delgado, and her knowledge of the fellow's character, held her back.

By this time Sibyl had given her husband every dollar of her grandmother's legacy; and now, to quiet him for the summer, Esther had to see him and give him three-quarters of her own. What are thousands of dollars to a man who gambles them away in a week, or a night, perhaps?

Antonio must have had a run of luck, for the trembling Esther did not hear from him the few weeks they remained at the seaside. A new trouble and dread, however, overshadowed every moment of her life. There were long nights in which she lay awake, wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, fearing that she would become insane. Sensitive, delicate in all her feelings, standing in awe of her father, every fiber of her being shrunk from the fact that he must soon know the truth. Sibyl, before very many weeks, would become a mother, and her marriage would have to be avowed. Already, it seemed to her excited imagination, the finger of suspicion pointed at her poor darling.

By this time, too, Sibyl's eyes were being opened to the character of the man she had married. She passed all their hours spent alone together in fretful bemoaning. Esther had to have courage for both. She would sit and look at the wide blue sea, wishing, with anguish of longing, that they two miserable ones, were out there alone on some deserted vessel, drifting to their death.

At last, in September, growing desperate, she proposed to her father, who had now to return to the city, that she and Sibyl should make a long visit to a relative in New England—a quiet old aunt, a farmer's widow, who had a comfortable home in the country. The judge, looking anxiously into his daughter's thin face and feverish eyes, said that he would willingly spare his children if she felt that the air of the country would do her any good.

Again she had to bribe Delgado into silence, with the remnant of her grandmother's bequest. He swore to say nothing for three months.

The young ladies went to visit their humble relative. She received them kindly. No sooner did Esther's gaze rest on her aunt's meek, plea-

sant face, than she felt that she had found a friend in whom she could confide. Her overstrained nerves gave way, and she fainted in the stranger's arms.

That evening, under cover of the soft twilight in which they sat on the vine-wreathed porch, Esther told her own and her sister's story. Her aunt, shocked and saddened though she was, refused neither her sympathy nor her aid.

With her they found a momentary peace. Through the cheerful September days the two sisters sat near her, listening to her wise views, and busy with little garments soon to be required. But even wise aunt Ruth could form no plan to get her nieces out of their difficulties. One thing she insisted on; and that was on introducing Sibyl to such of the neighbors as came in as Mrs. Brown.

Early in October a little girl baby was born—and a young mother died. Terrible expiation of youthful folly! The full weight of misery now fell on Esther's heart. Her sister was dead. What could she say to the father, summoned by telegram to his daughter's coffin? Now, indeed, he would learn all, and in what a way!

Her father was expected at midnight.

As it drew toward evening, Esther tied a veil over her head and set out to walk without saying anything to her aunt. She was no longer in her right mind. Protracted suspense and dread, with the sudden sorrow of that twin sister's death, threw her into a condition, if not of actual insanity, of passing frenzy.

She walked quickly along the deserted country road. She did not think or care where she was going. She had in her hand a pair of scissors with which she had been cutting out a little sacque for the baby. All at once two men, who had been slowly sauntering from the direction of the railroad station, but who had been hidden from her by a turn of the road, appeared before her. She stopped, staring wildly at them.

"By Jove," said one of them, carelessly, "she is astonished to see us! But we found out where our pretty ones had flown. How do you do, Esther? I've come to call on my wife."

"How do, Esther, my dear?" spoke the other one, with a shamed sort of laugh. "Going to give a fellow a kiss?" and he stretched out his arms to intercept her on the quiet green path.

She looked at one, then the other. Tom still laughed, while Delgado grinned at sight of her wild look.

Quick as lightning she flung herself on Tom, and her scissors drove straight to his heart. Then she turned on Antonio. His wife's picture in the pocket over his heart saved his life.

The scissors snapped off at the ends. Tom lay on the ground. Antonio bent over him, white with dismay, while he held the murderess off with one hand.

Poor Esther put her own thin hands up to her temples, pressed them hard and stared about her; then burst into an insane laugh and ran back in the direction of the house.

When she reached it, she fell insensible. She was seventeen that day—Sibyl died on her seventeenth birthday.

Esther did not have to confess to her father when he arrived by the midnight train; she was raving in brain fever.

For weeks she did not know what went on around her.

Meantime, the murder of the stranger had been discovered; the other stranger in his company had been arrested as the assassin; blood had been found on his garments; it had been proved that they walked away from the station together, and that Delgado returned alone; and he was in the county jail, awaiting trial.

On his preliminary examination he had pleaded "Not guilty," but he had accused no one else, nor given a satisfactory account of himself and his comrade.

The excitement of that quiet neighborhood was intense; nor did it subside for a long time after the prisoner "broke jail," and succeeded in effecting his escape from the country.

CHAPTER X.

THE WEDDING-RING.

MARAQUITA slept in the tent with her young mistress. Mercedes had a narrow camp-bedstead; her maid lay on a folded blanket on the earthy floor, close beside her, for space was limited.

Ben Brant lay on guard in front of the tent door, on the inside. His loud breathing could generally be heard, giving assurance that he was there.

His daughter, her pulse beating feverishly, her eyes wide open, lay long awake that night of Alexander's arrival at camp.

"What if those two should force me into this

marriage?" went singing, singing through her brain, hour after hour.

In vain she said to her fainting spirits, "Never! never!" She was beginning to understand how completely she was in her father's power, and what sort of men these were—not the chivalrous, courteous gentlemen who would die in defense of a woman, if need be; not true friends, nor even idle flatterers; but selfish, coarse men, ready to have their own way at any cost to others. For, Alexander was at heart as rough as her father, in spite of his outward polish, if he joined in the plan of making her an unwilling wife.

People think fast in times of danger. Many an impossible idea worried her and was cast aside, as she lay there sleepless. There remained only one thing for her—stubborn refusal. She would brave her father's anger if it cost her her life. Having her mind made up to this, she grew calm and fell to thinking of Lord Henry, wondering if he ever thought of her or dreamed that she carried his white rosebuds still, faded as they were. She was asleep and dreaming at last—dreaming that she was home in her Aunt Esther's lovely house, through which floated an exquisite odor of roses, and that her heart was swelling with rapture almost to breaking, for the fair-haired English lord was there, smiling into her eyes, while her fond aunt looked lovingly upon them both.

Out of this happy dream she was aroused by the touch of a cold hand. Opening her eyes she perceived, in the faint light of the approaching dawn, Maraquita sitting up and gazing at her; it was she who had touched her hand.

"Miss Brant," she whispered, "from what I noticed last evening I made up my mind you didn't love Bill Alexander any too well."

Accustomed as she was growing to the rough familiarities of the mines, Mercedes shrunk a little from the tone in which the girl spoke of Mr. Alexander.

"I'm glad you don't take to him. I know your father wants you to have him, because he's made o' gold. I'll tell you something. I wouldn't speak of it if I hadn't 'a' seen you two together. I was jealous of you before that. I wanted to kill you! I don't wonder you stare! But, you see, I expected Bill to marry me. He promised he would, four years ago, when I was sixteen. I loved him then, and I love him now. I'll never care for any other man. But he was only fooling me. Now he's got so rich he's ashamed of me. He treats me so that I hate him," hissing the whisper out; "but the next hour my anger melts and I find I love him yet. If I'd seen that you cared for him I think I should have plotted some way to harm you. I came out here to do it. But it has changed me toward you to see you don't care for him. You won't marry him, will you?"

"Not if I can help it, my poor Keety."

"He isn't good enough for you, Miss Brant. But he thinks he is. He's cold-hearted, vain and selfish. I know his faults. Still, I loved him at first and I love him still. He ought to marry me. I am a poor girl; but he got me to love him and trust him when I was a child; he should remember that! He'd just as soon set his foot on me and crush me as not. He would be glad to see me dead. My! how angry he looked when he found me here! I don't know what I shall do to him some day! Now, I thought I would tell you this. He was mad because he feared I would tell you. I defy him. And I do not fear that you will marry him."

"I despise him more than ever. Thank you for telling me, Keety."

The girl lay down on her pillow again. Her young mistress remained quiet until it was time to rise and dress.

Ben Brant, at the breakfast-table, was wonderfully surprised and pleased at the altered manners of his daughter. She had grown suddenly cheerful; toward Mr. Alexander she was complaisant; some of her old bewitching ways reasserted themselves. She not only chatted freely, but she was alive with that charm, so inexpressible yet so easily felt, which makes a beautiful girl, conscious of her loveliness and willing to please, the most enchanting creature in the world.

She wore a pale-pink morning-dress, and had pinned in her gold hair a little cluster of blue wild flowers which she found growing not far from the tent. Her glorious eyes flashed and melted and flashed again, as you have seen diamonds seem to dissolve in their own light and then suddenly shoot forth splendid rays. Her pale olive complexion, clear and fine as the leaves of a tea-rose, bore the sunlight without showing a flaw; it was one of those complexions that never freckle or tan, but grow more rich and velvety in full light.

The "gold-bug of Frisco" was delighted. He could hardly pay attention to the savory dishes served by old Katinka he was so absorbed in the novel pleasure of having Miss Mercedes condescend to be agreeable to him. It was the first time she had ever answered him except with evident contempt.

"By Jove! I never saw her equal! It would be a positive pleasure to see her fling my millions around! She'd make a show worth the money. If I get her I'll take her abroad. I'll be the envy of every man from here to Rome. There's some sense in being rich, with a wife as proud and handsome as she to show off my diamonds on! Coquette, too! Coming round, just in time! It's my opinion the little flirt put on those haughty airs just to hook me more securely, ha, ha, ha! Did it, too!"

So thought the ardent suitor as he watched the dainty trickeries of Mercedes. She replied to all his speeches graciously, and was playful with the strange father of hers. The men brightened up, grew talkative, humorous, a little boastful. The breakfast was a great success. Mercedes even condescended to ask:

"How long do you remain with us, Mr. Alexander?"

"I must return, or begin my return, to-morrow. May I say, that I trust the object of my journey will have been by that time accomplished?"

"What is the object of your journey?" innocently.

"Has not your father explained it to you?"

Mercedes barely was able to summon courage to meet his smiling eyes before her own drooped and a slow blush grew in her cheeks like the fire in the hearts of roses. She knew that he devoured that blush with his greedy look; and she almost died with shame and repugnance; but she had her part to play, and she summoned all her will to her aid.

"He spoke of—a bargain between you two," she answered.

"Well, call it a bargain, if you like. We Californians are great on business, you know. We do up our affairs quickly, too. No time to dawdle, you see, Miss Mercedes! Everything is done in a hurry. It's a habit we've got. No long engagements in California, ha, ha, ha! I don't mind telling you I'd like you to marry me to-day! The case is like this: I'm to lend my friend here, Ben Brant, a lot of money. He needs it, to use right away, in developing this magnificent bonanza. I give him the money and he gives me his daughter. Agreed. But, where is my security? Supposing you promise to marry me, I give him the cash, and afterward you go back on me? Don't you see, you would give me away! Now, I'm counted sharp, even in Frisco. I seldom get fooled. So I propose, as the fair and square thing, that you marry me at once, and be done with it. That will clinch the bargain."

"But we cannot be married here," replied Mercedes, her eyes on the tablecloth. "Who would marry us?"

"Ah! if that is the only difficulty, I have provided for it! I brought a priest with me—Father Ignatius."

"I am not a Roman Catholic."

"No more am I. But they tie the knot tight and well. What's the difference?"

"I must consider."

How beautiful she looked as she said it! Alexander's eyes sparkled. To have this proud beauty beside him in his chariot of gold as he rolled over the glittering course of life would be a triumph just suited to his taste. It was not a question of love—not in the least. It was to have a lovely young wife, who could not be sneered at by the highest, as the vulgar Queen of the Bonanzas; who had good-breeding, style, accomplishments. To such a wife he imagined he would be very indulgent. He would humor her caprices; put no check on her extravagance. And the temptation, to marry a girl as refined as Mercedes, would have been overwhelming. He thought it was now proving so. As her face was drooped and her long lashes down-bent, his heart throbbed with expectation.

"There's a poor devil of a Baptist preacher, with a license to marry, working with the miners, if you object to the priest, daughter," spoke up Brant, eagerly.

"I have not said that I wanted either, have I, father?" she asked, suddenly raising her laughing eyes.

They did not know just how to humor this capricious girl; yet they felt greatly encouraged, and Alexander was bound not to lose the advantage of her present mood.

"It is now or never!" he cried, gayly.

"To-day decides whether I lose every dollar I have invested and let the mines go to somebody

with capital, or whether I make millions in a year or two. Keep this in your mind's eye, Mercy; I've staked all on the venture, and if I lose, you an' I ain't worth a cuss apiece. There ain't many women would throw away a hull bonanza just for a whim. It's awful hard to be poor, out here. Like as not, you'll have to take up with a shanty for life, if you back out now,"—here Ben winked at his friend, his daughter's eyes being again veiled by their thickly-fringed lids.

"I have thought over all you said last night, father. I do not want to be obstinate. You men are so impatient! Give me a little more time. I promise you faithfully I will give you my answer at dinner."

"It must and shall be 'yes,' whispered Alexander, rising from the stump which had served him for a seat, lifting her hand and pressing it.

She only looked down and kept silent; she did not draw her hand away. Her lips quivered, but they smiled a little, immediately.

Ben Brant arose and took his partner by the arm. They walked away to inspect the progress the men made.

"There isn't a woman that can't be won by good looks, lots of the dust, and a little soft-sawder," it was thus Ben expressed his sentiments as they passed out of ear-shot of his daughter.

"Just so," assented Alexander, twisting his long mustaches around a slim finger. "I believe I've always been a favorite with the other sex. Still, I don't feel as confident as I wish I did. I half-suspect the girl is sly and means to play us a trick. She has come 'round too suddenly."

"Pooh! Mercy ain't sly," was her father's incredulous rejoinder. "That child's just as innocent as the angels. She don't know how to be tricky. She's proud as all get out. But she isn't tricky. She's got a strong sense of duty—else she wouldn't come out here with me just because I told her I was her father. She came along as meek as a lamb. And she isn't going to stand in my light now—don't you see?"

"You ought to understand her."

"I read her like a book the first day, sir!" asserted Brant. Doubtless he thought he did "read" the delicate, sensitive, conscientious mind of the girl who followed him meekly. But this was a mistake of his often indulged in by men. A girl's mind is a book no man ever yet read correctly, or ever will.

"Anyhow," he continued, brutally, "she's in my power, and can't help herself. I reckon she's got the sense to understand that. If I say—'Marry Bill Alexander,' she's got to marry Bill Alexander."

"Just so," responded the capitalist, coolly, the sneer growing a little under the shadow of his mustache; and then they came to the mouth of the shaft, which was already rigged and the work "in full blast," as Ben said.

CHAPTER XI.

"WELL MET, BY MOONLIGHT, PROUD TITANIA." It took them some hours to complete their examination and talk up their plans. There was not a doubt but that this would develop into one of the richest silver mines in Nevada. It was Alexander's first visit to the spot, and he was more than pleased with all he saw. Ben Brant was just the man to oversee and direct the actual work, while he was just the chap to manage the stock. He saw untold returns to be reaped from the money he was to lend Ben, who was the actual owner of the mine, but he resolved to stick to his terms—that the daughter should be the *bonus* given for the loan.

Ben Brant certainly did not object to this. A man long defrauded of his own by a false accusation, obliged to play the part of an absconded criminal, shifting for himself in the wilds of California, now that he had, at last, become free to assert himself, he developed a craving ambition all the stronger for being so long thwarted.

To see his daughter the wife of the famous gold-bug, playing the part of Bonanza Queen! that would satisfy his highest ambition.

Would he allow a girl's whim to stand between him and this consummation of his wishes? Ben Brant was not the man for that. He had been trained in too rough a school.

His child, now that he dared claim her, should be a source of good fortune to him. Her beauty, her dainty elegance, her manifold graces were all for his benefit.

The hours of the long, bright morning wore slowly on. Still Mercedes sat where they had left her, her elbow on the rude table, her chin in her hands, the lights and shadows of the somber

pinetrees, and the distant, dazzling clouds playing over her thoughtful face.

Maraquita sat on the ground, sewing on some article for her young mistress, her great black eyes often raised to study the troubled face of the lady she admired more than any other creature she had ever seen.

Now that she was no longer jealous of Miss Brant, she was as ready to die for her as she had previously been to murder her. Her only guide were her impulses, and those had never been governed.

Mercedes knew, perfectly well, that she was in her father's power. She had come to see, too, that he would use that power to please himself.

A thousand times she repented not refusing to acknowledge him in the first place. What had he ever done for her, but make her wretched?

"Oh, for wings!" she murmured, looking off over the crowded mountain points that bristled along the horizon, and the dreary, dreary valleys and plains.

But wings would not come for the wishing. She must save herself or perish utterly in the moral degradation of a marriage like that about to be forced upon her. No one could help her. She must think fast and acutely. She must rely only on herself.

Several times she cast a wild glance around her, as if looking for a friend; but there was only old Katinka, pottering about among her pans and kettles, between the camp-fire and the tent, and the brown-faced, passionate, unreasoning creature at her feet.

At times she lost herself in dreams of some far-away green garden, where a fair-faced English gentleman was gathering white roses, which he poured into her lap or wound about her head.

Once she screamed aloud—"Aunt Esther! Aunt Esther!"

Alas! Aunt Esther had given her up at the first demand. That was what had wounded Mercedes most cruelly.

She was too proud to appeal to one who had abandoned her, even had her aunt been within reach of her imploring cry.

Dinner time came. The two speculators returned from their exploring expedition in a soiled condition, made a hasty toilet and took their places at the board.

With a woman's power of dissembling, the young lady greeted them cheerfully. Again she exerted herself to be entertaining. She chatted, smiled, passed the jest. Once, looking up inadvertently, she saw her father winking at the capitalist, as much as to say, "Easily won, after all! I told you so!"

For an instant the maiden's eyes flashed fire, a burning blush spread over bosom and brow. But she regained her self-possession. She could not afford to betray her angry scorn.

Old Katinka had prepared quite a formal dinner. After the soup, game, potted meats, came canned fruit, nuts and raisins, delicious coffee. Mr. Alexander sat by the young lady.

"Are we to have a wedding, to-night, my beautiful?" he whispered, as Mercedes, smiling and satisfied, toyed with the dessert.

She turned a sparkling jewel on one of her taper fingers.

"Has monsieur a suitable ring?" she returned, not looking in his face, and speaking very low.

"I thought of that," was the eager reply.

He took from his vest pocket a little box, which he opened, displaying two rings—a heavy plain gold one and, for a guard, the largest, most lustrous, pure-white diamond she had ever beheld.

"Will you wear them, to-day?" he asked, his sallow face firing up into something like absolute delight. "Look at me, little one! Answer me—shall we have the priest here at once?"

She forced herself to raise her eyes until they met his:

"Not now—this evening—by moonlight."

He seized her hands and covered them with kisses.

"Listen," she said, in a choked voice, which she vainly endeavored to keep firm, "there are conditions," drawing away her hands.

"Oh!"

"You may think them hard conditions; but, father"—turning toward Brant, who sat grinning with pleasure at what had passed—"I swear to you, by my mother's memory, unless both you and Mr. Alexander give me your word of honor as gentlemen to keep strictly to the conditions, you cannot force me to this marriage. I will defend myself," touching the little revolver, which now she constantly carried in her belt.

"Hoity-toity!" said Ben, bursting into a coarse laugh.

"What are the conditions, Miss Brant?" Alexander anxiously asked. "Anything in reason; and for so fair a prize, I would agree to any terms. I would like to consult your feelings, and, since you are to be my wife, I would even be willing you should care for me a little," and he smiled.

"If you are unwilling to lend father the money without the security, then the marriage shall take place this evening"—she spoke firmly enough now, though her face was pale—"on this condition:

"You are not to claim me as your wife for six weeks—are not to speak to me or visit me in that time. In this way, while making sure of your bargain, I will have a little period in which to become accustomed to this sudden prospect. At the end of the six weeks, Mr. Brant is to bring me to San Francisco and deliver your wife over into your keeping. She will then try to be a loving, faithful wife to a man she has already taken a strong fancy to. Am I unreasonable, gentlemen?"

She smiled brilliantly. Alexander gazed at her in an infatuated way, gnawing his mustache with vexation at the delay, yet flattered and mollified by the compliment in her last sentence.

She was bewitchingly, maddeningly beautiful.

"By all the mines of Ophir," he swore at last, "I would wait longer than that to make sure of such a wife."

"Father, can you take me to meet Mr. Alexander in six weeks?"

"I expect to have to go to Frisco more'n once this summer."

"Then do you both agree to that condition?"

"We do."

"Will you swear not to so much as touch my hand or speak to me, after the ceremony, until the interval has passed?"

"Yes, if I must, I will swear it. But you may trust my word."

"Very well. I will be ready at eight o'clock. And now, gentlemen, excuse me. Maraquita, come! We must be looking up a suitable toilet for so grave an occasion."

She bowed, with the stately grace of an empress, and glided into the tent, leaving the men to smoke their cigars at their leisure, vailing in the curling wreaths of smoke their profound wonder that the young lady had been conquered so easily.

Mr. Alexander was in a happy mood. He was pleased with the mines and with the lady. Nothing disturbed the tranquillity of that afternoon hour of repose. He busied his fancy with the set of jewels he would have manufactured for his bride. He would weight that proud head and that girlish bosom with pearls and diamonds. She should have altogether the most sumptuous turnout in San Francisco. How Mack and Dick and Sam would envy him! Wouldn't they swear she was a beauty! Wouldn't they curse their own dowdy wives! There was W—'s wife—she wore \$250,000 worth of jewels, and she was ugly as sin!

Ben Brant was in a good humor, too. He was rather glad his daughter had "struck" for a little time! "The harder she is to get, the more he'll prize her," he mused. "And I'll have the use of the money, now, all the same."

After a couple of hours *siesta*, the two went off to look after business again. The sun was setting when they came back to supper. Mercedes had been walking back and forth for some time: they saw her as they approached the table.

She was dressed in soft, misty white that glimmered against the dark background of the pines as she paced to and fro. Her long robe clung to her slim, supple, elegant figure. She had placed white flowers in her hair. As she came forward to meet them, it was evident that she was intensely affected. She was very pale, while her dark eyes glittered. Even Brant felt some pity for her, and beckoned her to sit by him.

Alexander kept quiet, for he was almost awed by her expression.

The priest, who had stopped overnight with a camp on the plain, had arrived in the course of the afternoon and was at table. Mercedes studied his face at intervals to find some hope for herself in it; but he was only a fat, greedy little father, without character enough to be appealed to, to rescue her from her hateful position. The drama must be played out.

It was nearly eight o'clock when tea was through.

"Would you like me to wear a veil, Mr. Alexander?" the bride asked, hurriedly, as she

stood by him one moment after they had left the table.

The full moon was just rising over the solitary plains. The horizon was still rosy with the fading sunset.

"As you please, Mercedes. Have you a veil?"

"Not a real bridal veil; but I have two or three yards of white lace in my trunk."

"I shall be satisfied with you any way."

"Thank you. Come for me in about ten minutes. We will stand just in front of the tent for the ceremony. I have always thought I should like to be married by moonlight."

"My sweet Mercedes!"

She had vanished from his side. The father busied himself with lighting some candles on an improvised altar before the tent door. In a few moments the bride appeared at the door, with her maid Maraquita in attendance.

All in a flutter of joy, the bridegroom stepped up and gave her his arm; they stood before the priest; the silver radiance of the moon fell over the bride's slender figure and face shaded in the mystic veil; the elaborate ceremony of the Church was gone through with as closely as the circumstances would permit; the golden circlet glimmered on a small hand, the benediction was pronounced.

Alexander went to embrace his bride, when Brant said, laughingly:

"Honor bright, Bill! Keep your promise, or there's no knowin' what tricks the little jade may be up to. She's a spunky piece."

"Oh, I mean to keep my word," was the rather sullen rejoinder.

Meantime, the bride disappeared within the tent, and when Maraquita came forth a little while after, she brought word to Brant that Mrs. Alexander would be excused from making her appearance that evening.

Ben produced some tolerable wine, and the men, including the priest, drank merrily "the health of the loveliest bride who had ever worn the wedding-ring in Nevada."

The miners, clustered around their fires, for the evenings were always a little cool up there in the mountains, had not a suspicion of what was going on over at the "boss's." Alexander would gladly have "treated" them all and given every fellow a gold-piece with which to celebrate his nuptials; but he was not quite so well satisfied with the conditions imposed on him as to be very demonstrative—married but debarred from even addressing his bride!

He wore a discontented look as he mounted his mule, after a very early breakfast at which no one but Brant and Katinka were present, and rode away down the winding defile.

However, looking back, he saw a fair vision at the tent door which smiled and kissed a fairy hand on which a ring flashed in the beams of the rising sun. He waved his handkerchief until a turn in the road took him out of sight.

"Six weeks will soon fly, my beautiful lady! See, then, if I do not punish you for sending me off in this style, while you laugh in your sleeve! I've got you there, madame!"

When she had seen the last flutter of the eloquent handkerchief Mercedes ran back into the tent, caught Maraquita in her arms, danced around with her in a frantic manner, and wound up by bursting into hysterical tears and laughter.

"Thank God! I am rid of him for the present!" she said, and the first thing the attendant knew her lady had fallen in a heap on her camp-bed and fainted quietly away.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW-HAND OF THE PAST.

MISS SILVERMAN was sitting in the small, bright, gilded *salon* of her suit of apartments in the Hotel Daubigne, Paris, with a letter open in her hand and her thoughtful eyes fixed on the floor, when a servant entered with a card.

"Lord Henry Essex! and I was just thinking of him!" she said to herself; then to the servant: "I am at home. Bring his lordship in."

The handsome lady was trembling in every nerve; but she summoned her will to her aid as she rose to receive her guest with that easy, cordial grace which was one of the charms of her manner.

"I am delighted to meet you here, Lord Henry. The pleasure is all the greater for being unexpected."

"Thank you, my dear Miss Silverman. I saw your name on the register, and was only too glad to pay my respects to the lady whose hospitality, when I was in America, I so much enjoyed," and then the young lord cast an anxious glance about the gay little *salon*.

It is true, he had not seen the name of the niece on the register, and yet he looked for her.

Miss Silverman knew perfectly well why he glanced about her *salon*; nor could she repress a heavy sigh:

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these—'It might have been!'"

The letter in her hand had already aroused in her mind a thousand passionate regrets. It was postmarked San Francisco, and was from the man who called himself Ben Brant. It was a rough scrawl, not very lengthy, but it contained matter which pained Esther like the sting of serpents. It was written during his stay at the Palace Hotel with his daughter, and had been forwarded from New York. It barely mentioned the fact that "his girl's fortune was made; she was going very soon to marry Bill Alexander, one of the biggest gold-bugs on the coast—a Bonanza king who could shoe her with diamond slippers, if she liked." He added, exultingly: "I made the match." He also reminded Esther of the past, repeating a fact which he had impressed on her mind during that interview in her house the night before he took his child away: "You are in my power. Remember that always, and don't interfere with the girl. I'm capable of taking care of her; and it would be a pity to spoil your soft white neck with a rope. You are a murderess, but so long as you behave the law won't be any the wiser. She is my child and I'm bound to get the good of it. She's going to do well."

It was with this letter clutched and crushed in her slender hand that Miss Silverman received her visitor.

"Never—never—never, since the world began, was a girl so cruelly punished for her folly as I was, and am!" was her bitter thought.

When Lord Henry glanced about inquiringly, she pressed her hand to her heart an instant, before she spoke with forced gayety:

"I hear rumors of your approaching marriage, my lord."

The young man colored and shook his head.

"It is a mistake. At least, I am not to marry this year; though my father is urging it," and then Esther saw, as the quick color faded, that he had a sad expression, and that he certainly was paler and thinner than of old.

He arose from his chair, walking up and down the room in great agitation. There was no one present save the two. Presently he paused in front of the lady.

"What is the good of keeping silence?" he began, impetuously. "Madame, I am a very unfortunate man. I met a young lady, in your house, who impressed me strangely—deeply—sweetly! The moment we met my heart went out to her. She was the one woman I had looked for, in my young dreams, as my future wife. We cannot account for these things. I chose her for my own as soon as my eyes rested on her. It appeared to me, too, without vanity, that she understood and accepted me, silently. No sordid calculation, no worldly prudence, nor fear of consequences entered into my blissful mood. Heaven made us for each other. I was happy."

"The following day I await eagerly the hour when custom permits of my making a morning visit. I go to your door as the dead approach the gate of heaven. I had no thought of anything but happiness—of meeting her again. Ah! Miss Silverman, you are crying!—you pity me! Why did you send her away? Why did you separate us? Why have I never been able to meet those divine eyes since that fatal night? I cannot understand it."

"It seems to me now that my whole future life is clouded. My family are urgent that I should marry my cousin, Lady May. She is a sweet, pure, lovely, lovable girl—too good for me—but she is not the mate for whom my heart cries. Heaven will have no hand in *that* match. I dare say I shall marry her, for—it is so ordained by others; we shall live a peaceful, hum-drum life."

"I have made a bold fight against it. I am struggling yet. I am here in Paris with my father, the earl; he expects, on our return to London, that I shall have made up my mind. The earl is vexed and out of patience with me. He suspects that I am in love with some fair American, and, very naturally, is displeased and uneasy."

"Madame, where is Miss Mercedes? Why were we kept apart? Is there any reason on your parts why my acquaintance with her shall not be pursued? Will I meet her again? Is she coming here?"

Esther wiped away her tears as his rapid questions came to a pause.

"I am sorry for you," she said, looking up into his manly face, pale with his emotion, "and sorry for Mercedes. I believe she would have felt for you what you express for her, had

not an accident separated you. She was my niece, as you know—"

Here she came to a dead stop. It was impossible to tell him the whole truth, and it would do no good; yet it was unfair to give him no explanation.

"She had lived with me from her infancy, for her mother died in giving her birth, and her father—was engaged in speculations—in California. I had almost begun to hope that he would never claim his daughter; but I was doomed—to a bitter disappointment. He came for her the very evening you made her acquaintance."

She was speaking slowly and painfully. Suddenly she paused, looking at him almost wildly. Lord Henry waited in great anxiety for her to go on.

"As his affairs required his immediate return to San Francisco they left me, the father and my dear child, the following morning. My darling was torn from me almost without warning. It was a—great trial and shock to both of us. Do you wonder, Lord Henry, that I was unable to receive you that day? I shut myself up; I was ill with grief, for to me the loss was terrible—terrible!"

"Yes, you were much changed when I saw you. It must have been a sorrowful parting. Why, my dear lady, did you not explain to me that Miss Mercedes had gone away with her father to a distant part of the country?"

"Why did I not explain?" repeated Esther, staring at him with great dark eyes full of trouble. "I said she had gone away. I dare say I was not entirely myself. The blow half-crazed me. You see she was the child of my twin-sister—almost like my own—and she had been with me always; and then to have to give her up so completely, so unexpectedly, to be borne away so far!"

"Did she know her father well?"

"Not—very."

"Do you imagine she is contented with him? Do you not believe she is homesick, with the sea between you two?"

"I am afraid so."

"But you hear often? She writes you every week? Pardon me! I know it is impertinent—that I have no right, but my interest in Miss Mercedes is too deep to stop at ceremony. Is she well—happy?"

"Only tolerably so, I fear. She does not complain. She may marry some day out there, and marry well. There are some fine, enterprising spirits among the men of El Dorado, Lord Henry."

"I hope to Heaven none of them will win Miss Mercedes," spoke up the young gentleman, flushing. "Strange as it may seem, I do not know, certainly, your niece's name, Miss Silverman! I took it for granted it was Silverman, also; but that is not her father's name, of course?"

"His name is Benjamin Brant."

How hesitatingly she spoke! If Lord Henry had not been so completely absorbed in his own feelings he must have begun to suspect something wrong or strange about Mercedes's history. But he did not take note of the lady's manner, except that he thought her distressed by the parting from her niece. His thoughts had rushed, pell-mell, to that far-away magic city of the extreme West, enriched doubly now by the presence of that beautiful being whom Fate had taken from him without so much as a polite "By your leave."

It was something to know where she was! Yet thousands upon thousands of miles of tumbling seas and wearisome lands lay between them! He thought of the fair face of his cousin May, of his father's quiet, kind, yet irresistible opposition; courageous as he was by nature, his spirits sunk lower and lower. He became silent.

In vain Miss Silverman attempted to enter into a light conversation on surrounding topics. Her own heart was heavy and the young gentleman was dull and absent-minded. Finally he arose to terminate his visit.

"You used to know my father, Miss Silverman?"

"Yes. I visited his place at Roselm several years ago, when I was staying in England for some months. The countess was alive then. I shall never forget what a stately and noble pair they were! I was a guest of our Minister's, when we were all invited to spend a fortnight at Roselm. All the days of that fortnight were red-letter days."

"Then, may I bring the earl to call upon you this evening, if you have no other engagement?"

"I have no other binding engagement, and shall be very happy to renew my acquaintance with the Earl of Essex."

When the door had closed behind Lord Henry, Esther, who had held Brant's letter in her hand during the visit, proceeded to tear it into minute fragments which she then summoned Rosine to take away.

"I have a headache, Rosine, and shall lie down until you come to dress me for dinner. Consequently I shall be at home to no one. Get out something handsome for me to wear this evening; I expect a call from an earl," laughing rather bitterly. "How will the new Worth dress do? It looks as if it might be becoming. Well, take care of things, Rosine, while I shut myself up with this headache."

"Shall I not bathe your head, Miss Silverman?"

"Silence and darkness will be the best medicine, thank you, Rosine."

Yet when Esther had laid herself down on her couch and her careful maid had closed the curtains and doors and gone softly away, she found that silence and darkness were poor ministers to her "mind diseased." Long shiverings ran from head to foot of the prone figure on the bed:

"Again he calls me that terrible word. *Am* I a murderess? Ah, yes! I killed him. I certainly killed poor Tom—my husband! He called himself my husband, yet I never was his wife. We went through that foolish ceremony together, but it was a mockery! I was only a foolish, ignorant child when he persuaded me. I grew to hate him, because he had entangled me in that dreadful net. I hated Delgado because Sibyl loved him; because he made us such trouble; because he was a liar, a gambler by profession, a fortune-hunter; because he took our money, Sibyl's and mine. He ruined our young lives; my sister—my dear, darling, suffering sister died; and I went *mad*."

"I never was quite certain, after that brain-fever passed away, whether or not I had done the deed. Sometimes I remembered myself doing it; yet, the next hour, I would be certain that it was only a fancy of my delirium. God knows I never intended to do it—that, if I did do it, I was irresponsible at the time."

"Yet he taunts me with being a murderess. Oh, horror, horror! *must* I listen to that word? He threatened me with the deed, and that he would accuse me of it, unless I gave up his child to him without opposition."

"What does he want of my poor darling?—the only one creature I had to love! Does he love her? Does he care for her happiness? No! She is beautiful, and he will put her up in the matrimonial market-place! Perhaps her hand is already bargained away! He gives me to understand so. Misery! misery!"

"I would that every innocent, confiding girl in the wide world could hear me warn her against secret engagements—against deceiving those at home who have only her welfare at heart when they seem cold and prudent—against acquaintances or friends not approved by her parents. Ah! I have paid in tears and groans for my folly! A girl's folly! Not her crime—only her folly!—yet the punishment is endless and deadly; and, who knows?—the worst may be yet to come!"

"I fear and detest that man. And still, as he said to me, I should be grateful to him! He stood between me and that horror which I committed in my insane phrensy. He was imprisoned for my deed, yet he kept his lips closed. He became a fugitive under an assumed name, yet he never accused or betrayed me. 'You were only a girl,' he said to me in that dreadful interview at my house, 'and I thought I could bear it better than you!' Surely, there must have been some true nobility of soul in a man capable of such a sacrifice. Antonio Delgado was not all evil. He saved me. Why can I not be friendly with him? Ah, if he would return my darling to me! If he would treat Mercedes as he should! I am sick with fear that he will not be a good father to her. And I shall not dare to interfere in his plans because, as he boasts, I am in his power! It is terrible to be in the power of a coarse creature like that."

"Through what long years I waited, fearing, and sometimes hoping that he was dead, yet always, after the long silence gave birth to that hope, always receiving the hated letter, at last, asking to be informed as to the welfare of 'his child.' Sometimes I wish that the sweet babe had died with its poor mother."

"Mercedes! Mercedes! I want you—I need you! I am so lonely without you! You are wretched, my child, and I am not near to comfort you! I cannot send Lord Henry to rescue you. His English pride would take fire at sight of your father."

"People say to me that I am the one envied woman of their acquaintance! 'Rich, hand-

some, independent, happy,'—that is what they repeat, parrot-like, over and over."

"The veriest slave that wears his manacles is not so much a slave to his master as I am a slave to that folly of my girlhood."

With low moans and choking self-accusations Esther wore herself out, until she fell into the broken sleep of exhaustion.

Out of this sleep she was aroused by Rosine, who lighted the wax-tapers about the mirror and laid out the costly dress, thus gently awakening her mistress.

"Rosine, must I replace the mask again?" asked Esther, as she raised her heavy head from the pillow.

The maid stared until Miss Silverman was forced to smile.

"Are you going to one of those wicked masked balls, madame?" asked the simple creature, alarmed.

"No, no, Rosine; I was jesting. I want my dinner, and then I remain at home to receive the Earl of Essex."

"Some American ladies do go, I hear," apologized Rosine, blushing; and then proceeded to elaborate Miss Silverman's toilet.

"You would not think me thirty-five if you did not know, would you, Rosine?" Esther asked, when she was ready for dinner.

"I should scarcely believe madame to be twenty-five," and this flattering answer was not flattery at all; for Hester Silverman, in her wonderful composite dress of pink silk and silver gauze, with pink roses and diamonds in her dusky hair, a glow on her rich cheeks, a sparkle in her lustrous eyes, with her rounded arms, her dimpled wrists and beautiful taper hands, all softened by the magic light of wax candles, easily slipped ten years from the beads of her life.

For some reason, which she did not attempt to explain to herself, she felt a keen interest in renewing her brief past friendship with the Earl of Essex.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WRONG LADY.

THE six weeks of camp-life that followed the curious wedding dragged interminably on to Mercedes; and yet they went, after all, too frightfully fast, as she realized when they were gone, and her father bade Maraquita, one evening, pack the trunks and make all things ready for a trip to Frisco.

"You are ready to keep your word to Bill Alexander, I take it," Ben remarked, seeing the change on his daughter's countenance.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Brant."

"Well, you needn't look so scared about it. Girls have got married before now, and on just as short an acquaintance. Bill will be a good husband, if you treat him right. He'll want you to make much of him of course—pet him up like a sick canary, you know! and you can do anything with him, then. It's a bad time for me to leave here, with the machinery a-coming out any day, now; but the ore can wait and Bill can't. I'll stick to my part of the contract and deliver you into your husband's hands, safe and sound; then I'll leave you to enjoy your honeymoon and hurry back to the mines. I've made out the papers as well as I could which give you half of my half of this Bonanza, the Josephine mine. It's my wedding-present to my only child; and I reckon that Queen Victoria didn't get anything like such a present as that when she got married! If it's worth a cent it's worth half a million a year, little one! What do you say to that?"

"I say thank you, father! Can you give me a thousand dollars as soon as we reach the city? I want to provide myself with a few things which I greatly need."

"Certainly; as much as you want," was the answer given in high good humor.

The next morning a small party set out on the journey back to the nearest point at which they could touch the railroad. Several men went along as guides and servants—old Katinka remaining behind, as Ben "allowed to be back in a fortnight;" but her daughter accompanied her young mistress.

"Leaving the tavern is half the journey," the old brown witch remarked, consolingly, as the little cavalcade set out. "You will soon be in Frisco. God save you, my daughter! They say the bride eats least at the wedding; but I wish you a merry honeymoon, my lady! I shall throw my old shoe after you, miss, once you are started on the way. Attend to sending up the canned vegetables, Ben Brant; for water alone will not make the olla. *Che sabe?* May you have good luck!"

Maraquita turned in her saddle and blew her old mother a kiss. There was a strange, excit-

ed expression on her brown face; her splendid eyes flashed fire; the red showed through the olive tint of her oval cheeks. She looked such a handsome, spirited young woman that Ben Brant suddenly began to whistle softly, thinking to himself:

"How would Mercy like her waiting-maid for a step-mother?—he, he, he!" but Ben's thoughts were too quickly again taken up with his mines to dwell on softer subjects.

After four or five days of rough traveling, supplemented by camping out at night, Brant and his party reached the railroad; and from thence were whirled swiftly on toward the Golden Gate.

Mercedes had requested her father not to telegraph their approach to Mr. Alexander, as she would like a few hours to herself after reaching the city before meeting him.

"Yes, yes, yes," smiled Ben; "I know. Time to pretty yourself up; that's right. I want you to make a grand splurge this evening. You'll be dressed in your best and come down to dinner on Alexander's arm. The whole hotel will be wild with excitement. Everybody will want to see the woman Bill Alexander has married! You're equal to the occasion, Mercy; if Bill's mighty rich, you're mighty handsome! You'll make a team, you two!"

The more her father exulted the paler Mercedes grew. She had been silent and thoughtful on the journey; yet had kept up remarkably well. Now, as the cars rolled into the suburbs, marble was not colder or whiter than her face. It had not been so terrible to think of meeting the man who called her wife when that meeting was still in the dim distance; approaching it, face to face, her courage oozed away until it seemed to her that she should die of shame and dread before the curtain went down on the little drama she had planned. Mercedes was but a timid girl and the part she had to act was one that called for a brave spirit.

"Thunder and blazes! Where's all your color gone, Mercy? You look more as if you were going to be buried than meet your husband. Pick up a few roses, or Bill won't know his blooming bride when he sees her. You look as if you were scared out of your five senses."

"I am frightened. Keep your promise, father, not to let Mr. Alexander speak to me until an hour before dinner. I *must* get rested, and have time to dress."

"I sha'n't want him to see you till you look different from that."

"Very well. If he should happen to be about the hotel, I will go straight to my room and you can ask him not to call until four o'clock. Maraquita, pin this veil over my face."

It chanced when the Palace Hotel coach came back from the depot with its passengers Mr. Alexander was nowhere in the vicinity. He had been expecting a telegram every day, for the six weeks were more than up; but he did not think of the party arriving without notifying him.

Ben Brant was smilingly recognized by the hotel officials. Possibly Alexander had confided to the manager that he was expecting his bride.

Ben pompously ushered his daughter into the reception-room until their keys were brought them; and there, glancing about the room through her thick veil, the startled eyes of Mercedes fixed themselves on a face and figure the very sight of which set her heart to throbbing suffocatingly and the red roses to blaze out on her cheeks.

Can it be? Yes. There is no mistake!

Oh, how glad she was that her veil was down, so that he did not recognize her! How cruel to her, that he, of all men, should be here in this house, at this crisis of her life! There was the graceful figure, the well-set head, with its fair, short curls, the frank blue eyes, the tawny mustache and firm chin—who else could it be but Lord Henry Essex?

What had brought him to San Francisco?

Mercedes trembled in every limb. Her father spoke to her to follow him, but, for a minute, she had not the power to take a step. The clear, deep-blue eyes of the English lord just glanced, with well-bred indifference, at the slim, elegant figure of the veiled young lady. There must have been something in it that stirred his memory since he, too, startled, and with rising color, turned and looked again, and seemed about to approach and address her.

Then Mercedes tore her rooted feet from the floor and followed her father. Lord Henry strolled out of the reception-room to ask the clerk the name of the new arrivals.

"Ben Brant, daughter and maid."

Benjamin Brant was the name written down in his note-book.

"Who is this Brant?"

"Oh, he used to be a poor devil who haunted the mines, digging or gambling, or both. He's got up in the world, lately—owns mines, got plenty of the dust; and, if rumor is correct, has entered into a speculation with one of our gold-bugs that'll make him one of our big men. That's the style in California. Make a note of it, my lord! A poor man ten years ago; a big-bug, now. Got the handsomest girl for a daughter you ever saw; perfect beauty! Take a good look at her when she comes down to dinner, and see what you think of her. I don't mind telling you, my lord, though the news isn't published yet, that she either is married, or is going to be immediately, to Alexander, one of those Bonanza fellows, worth anywhere between eight and ten million. I'll point him out to you when he comes in."

"Thank you; I wish you would," murmured Lord Henry, who walked away in a dazed manner, picked up a newspaper to conceal his face, and sunk down in one of the office chairs.

So! that rough, coarse-grained man was the father of that refined, beautiful girl, with whom he had fallen so foolishly in love! That was a profound shock to the aristocrat. He felt that he had been nothing less than ridiculous in his folly. Ah! married, or to be married immediately to a "fellow" with three times the money all the estates of his earldom would bring. And he, fool that he was, had deserted the fair cousin, whose wistful blue eyes had betrayed her heart to him, to come five thousand miles for a glimpse of a rough miner and to hear a piece of news!

"I start homeward to-morrow," resolved Lord Henry, pulling the ends of his golden mustache vindictively; and then a great sigh struggled up through the mountain of pride that kept it down, and tears rushed into the blue eyes as if they had been a woman's.

Poor boy! they were not tears of mortification alone; the deepest disappointment of his young life had come upon him.

"I will see her once more. I will keep myself in the background and have one more look at her as she enters the dining-room. She must have recognized me, yet she never so much as bowed! And I came all the way from Paris to San Francisco to try and find her!"

Lord Henry flung down the newspaper and went to his rooms, there to walk about distractedly until the dinner hour arrived.

Meantime the new arrivals had taken possession of the suit of apartments they had occupied before they went to the mines.

"Father, can you give me that thousand dollars, now?"

Brant counted out the gold very readily.

"And please, give me two hours."

"Oh, certainly. I'm going to take a bath and consult the barber, myself. I'll bring Alexander to you about half-past four."

He went out, and then mistress and maid looked at each other.

"You are as white as linen, Maraquita; your eyes are like stars."

"Ah, miss, you are as pale as these white roses. I wonder if you tremble as much as I do. I shall never be able to do your hair, at this rate! I wish I were dead and in my coffin!"

"Hush, my poor child! Have courage! Summon all your resolution! When one is in the right she ought not to fear."

"He will strike me dead at his feet. I know he will! Yet what do I care for that? It is easier to die than live. And I shall have had my revenge. It is only that I quail before his scorn. I do not like to feel his scorn. It is bitter, when one loves, to be made to feel a man's contempt."

"You look on the dark side, Maraquita. All may yet be well. I pray to God that it will be well. God is our friend, my child. It is not we who have done wrong. I was in the power of two unscrupulous men, alone, friendless, in a wild country. I did the best I could to protect myself. I think Heaven will have pity upon me and aid me in what I am trying to do. Where is my purse? I must put this money in it and keep it with me. Now! I will have my bath, and you shall put up my hair. We must hurry, to get all done. You can lay out our dresses at once. Why do you cry, Maraquita? You will spoil your bright eyes. I want you to look and behave your best. Courage! courage!"

While her young mistress was in the bathroom, the girl laid out two costumes, with the accessories. One was a handsome evening-dress of tea-rose silk, with white-gloves, lace handkerchief and flowers. The other was a plain brown silk traveling-dress, with bonnet and mantle.

Mercedes and her maid had been waiting in the little parlor, fifteen minutes, when Brant knocked at the door and entered with Alexander. A girl's face never looked braver than did the face of the supposed bride, when the latter hastily advanced, all smiles, with outstretched arms, to embrace her, where she stood quietly by the center-table.

"So you have come, my angel! my sweet wife!"

Mercedes fell back a pace to escape his touch, saying, coldly:

"You mistake, Mr. Alexander. I am not your wife."

The two men stared at her with sudden astonishment.

"Not my wife?" stammered Alexander.

"Oh, get out with your fooling, girl!" cried Brant, roughly. "What do you want to spoil the fun for, by meeting him like an icicle?"

"Because I am not his wife, father."

"Didn't I see you two married with my own eyes?"

"Never! I was never married to Mr. Alexander."

"Oh, yes, you were, my beauty. You can't get out of it now," said the bridegroom, flaming up to a white rage at this unexpected opposition. "It's too late in the day to escape, my little snowdrop. You're mine; and I paid dear for you, too."

"Much more than I was worth, sir; and so I saved you from the folly. I never intended, for a single moment, to become your wife, and be sure I took care not to."

"You lie like an imp!" shouted Brant, stepping up and shaking his finger in his daughter's blanched but resolute face. "I reckon the priest can be found to prove it. Hold up your hand. Let us see your wedding-ring, you little minx, you!"

She held up her small white hand with a smile; there was no ring there.

"Listen," she said, in a low but ringing voice.

"I admit there was a marriage. You, father, tried to sell me; and you, like an honorable gentleman, tried to buy me. I was friendless and in your hands. I made no outward resistance; but if Heaven had not given our sex some art to play our parts, we would be at your mercy indeed. There was a young woman, Mr. Alexander, who did love you, and whom you had promised, more than once, to marry. That young woman wore my dress and took my place before the priest. In the moonlight the change was not noticed. You married, sir, the girl you should have married. *There stands your wife!* You will find your ring upon her finger."

The two men, directed by a queenly motion of the young lady's hand, turned and gazed upon Maraquita. In the excitement of the time they had not even noticed that she was in the room.

The poor girl stood there with downcast eyes, pale and shivering. Her shining black hair was piled up in fashionable coils and puffs and dressed with flowers; she wore the tea-rose silk, with its long train, and one of her little brown hands was gloved—the other was clasped over it, and on the fourth finger glittered the golden circlet with its diamond guard.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A TRICK WORTH TWO."

"Look up, my child. Do not be afraid. You are his wife," said Mercedes, still in that clear, brave young voice.

She herself was dressed in the brown traveling-suit; her shawl and sachel were on the table by which she stood.

The crimson rose in Maraquita's pale cheeks; she raised her soft dark eyes timidly to her husband's face; a curse sprung to his lips.

"It's a blank infernal fraud," he cried. "You are the woman I married, and as sure as you are a woman, I'll have you yet. You'll stand by me, Brant! You'll swear *this* is the girl I married! Ah-h! it is your own fault if you are not really my wife. I shall swear to it that you are—shall treat you as if you were! The law and evidence will be on my side. It is *you* who are in a pretty scrape, my dear, not I—ha! ha! ha!—if any little game has been played. Brant, you'll swear to my side?"

"I rather guess I will! I will swear fast and strong to what I saw with my own eyes!"

"Ha! ha! ha! How are you going to prove, my beauty, which of you I married? I shall be at liberty to take my choice! You may raise a big row, if that is your bent, but it will end as I want it to. You thought to get the better of me—and you burned your own fingers. I shall claim you as my wife; and if you really are not, 'twill be all the worse for you. So far as I or your father know, I married you fair and full. If you leave me, I shall get out the papers that

will bring you back to me. Better keep the facts to ourselves and save a public row.

"As for you, you impudent little mule!" turning savagely to Maraquita, "go to your room, take off that finery, give my wife her rings, and get! Never let me see you again. I've had too much of you!"

Even a worm will turn when trodden on; and Maraquita was no worm, but a passionate creature whose blood was warmed with the fire of Southern sunlight. Her eyes sparkled; her bosom heaved.

"You cannot help my being your wife, Bill; and I'm glad of it."

"Shut your mouth, or I'll strangle you."

"I'd rather be strangled by you than not. I'm not afraid of you."

Mercedes spoke again:

"This girl is too good, too young, too pretty for you, Mr. Alexander; yet she is now your wife, willing to try and please you. Do you discard her?"

"Utterly! I know who is my wife. This is a ridiculous fuss about nothing. Are you going down to dinner in that plain dark dress, Mrs. Alexander? All the hotel knows you are a bride."

"I am not going down to dinner at all. My ticket to New York is bought and in my pocket. I leave this house in half an hour. Father, I am sorry. I would have been a good daughter to you; but you used your claims on my duty for your own selfish benefit. I am afraid to remain with you. Your ways and ideas are all different from mine. I shall go back to New York; and if aunt Esther will not take me in, I can do something to take care of myself."

"Your aunt Esther will not dare take you in," asserted Brant, in an excited manner. "Did she dare keep you when I came for you?—neither will she take you back. Your aunt is a nice woman, very aristocratic, very high in her notions; but she's got her black secret like the rest of us! She's afraid of me. I know her history. Come, behave yourself, you little fool! Go and get on a white dress, and go down to dinner with your husband. We're the best friends you've got in the world, and the only ones."

Mercedes grew very sick at heart as she stood there confronting these brutal men. Driven into the ruse which she had practiced, out at the mines, to save herself further trouble there, she had come on to San Francisco, when the time of grace expired, to announce the deception practiced and to avow her intention to return to the East.

At the mines she had been alone; in the city she felt that she could, if the worst came to the worst, throw herself on the protection of the officers of the law, and therefore she had planned that the denouement of her little plot should be announced after she had reached a place where she could appeal to the police. It was not pleasant to face these men with her story; but, desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and there had been no other course open to her. Then, too, she thought herself only doing justice to the deserted girl whom the rich stock-dealer had cast aside, and Maraquita had entered eagerly into the plan.

Now that the moment of avowal came the effort it required to endure her father's anger and the rage of the bridegroom was heroic. She thought she had only to tell Mr. Alexander how she had thwarted him, and then to go away in peace.

She was utterly confounded, therefore, at the threats which followed—alarmed, actually appalled by fear that what they said was true; but she still fought to conceal her consternation and retreat in safety.

What Brant said about her idolized aunt came upon her with fresh surprise and dread. Could it be? What secret could her admired Aunt Esther have, which could place her at the mercy of a man like this? Yet her aunt had cowered, had yielded, had given her up at a word from him, even as he now taunted her.

The world looked very forlorn to Mercedes, if she could not even return to Aunt Esther. Very bleak, friendless and melancholy it seemed. To add to her embarrassment and distress was the knowledge that Lord Henry, who had seen her in her true position before, should be here in this hotel where the unavoidable gossip which would follow her flight, would reach his ear. Every fiber of the sensitive girl-nature shrunk from the idea of scandal.

Alexander, with all his gold, was not a gentleman, and, in his fury, might revenge himself by a false account of their affairs.

He was not a man to be safely laughed at, and the whole crowd of his acquaintance would be in a roar of merriment if it heard how he had been juggled out of a bride.

He threatened to arrest her as a runaway wife! Was it possible that he would be able to do it?

The blood in her veins chilled; she gasped but could not bring out a word, when she tried to answer her father.

"That's right," added Ben, coaxingly. "Don't be a fool any longer. Go and put on something handsome and come down with us. We'll make it all right before bedtime. If you are not Bill's wife, we'll call in a clergyman quietly, who'll soon make you so, tight as a halter. We'll stand considerable nonsense from a young and pretty woman; but you've gone the length of your tether now, and it's time we pulled you up, short. I'll give you fifteen minutes to fix up, like a gold-bug's lady ought to. Go along an' help Mrs. Alexander change her dress, Keety."

Mercedes turned and walked away into her bedroom. She did not dare lift her bonnet or traveling-bag from the table. She sat down on the side of the bed, trying to think to some purpose; but her brain whirled. It would be some hours before the train for the East started out of the depot; there would be time for Mr. Alexander to carry out his threat of having her arrested.

She might escape into the street, perhaps; what would she do then? She did not know a person in the city to whom she could appeal.

"At least I can kill myself," she muttered, in her awful despair.

"No, no, my dear lady," murmured Maraquita. "I can take you to a house, where you will be safe for the present, if only we can steal out of the hotel. See! there is no door into the corridor from this bedroom—only into the parlor. You cannot escape now. You must go to dinner; and then we'll see what we can do."

Again Mercedes tried to steady her whirling brain.

"I will go down then with my father, and in this dress. Oh, Maraquita, fix upon something while I am at table. After the trick we played them at the mines they will not trust us a minute. I shall have to appeal to the people of the hotel. Anyhow, I have my little revolver here, where I can reach it," and despite her trembling nerves the expression of her pallid face was one of terrible resolve.

"Time's up!" called Brant at the door.

His daughter went out.

"Father, I will go down with you. Let Mr. Alexander keep his distance for the present."

"I will 'tame the shrew' before long," muttered the gold-bug; "and look out for tricks, Ben Brant! Keep a sharp eye on her. I suppose we may as well have our dinner."

The three descended to the dining-room, Alexander white with chagrin.

As soon as they were gone Maraquita changed her attire to her usual black dress and white apron, slipped out into the corridor and was about to explore the premises for some back entrance out of which she might smuggle her young lady when the opportunity occurred. Hardly had she taken a step outside the door of the small parlor before a very handsome young gentleman, with a somewhat pale and agitated face, darted out of the room adjoining, and stood in her way.

"Pardon me—the young lady—I am a friend of hers—knew her in New York, you know," he stammered, in haste.

"Holy saints! did you really?" murmured the girl.

She regarded the stranger with admiration, notwithstanding her excitement and anxiety. He was so young and so pale with emotion—a real gentleman, as she could tell at a glance.

"I was a great friend of hers—and of her aunt. You have heard her speak of her aunt, Miss Silverman? Yes, of course. Excuse me, but the transom was open; I could not avoid hearing the conversation in that room. In short, the young lady is in trouble; they are scoundrels, these men! I am anxious to help—to befriend—Oh, what can I do to—"

"You desire to aid us, senor?"

"Undoubtedly. You cannot imagine the friendship I have for Miss Mercedes. If she would trust me—would allow me—"

"I will tell her. I think she would be glad of a true friend, senor; she certainly will kill herself, if things go on this way."

"Cannot we think of some way? Suppose I have a carriage with a pair of fast horses, and a coachman bribed to do his best; and you get your young lady to come down to the side door? I only ask five minutes the start of those rascals and we will fool them yet! I will be careful of her as a brother could be."

"But where could you go?"

"Ah, there it is! I am a stranger."

"Who is it whom I shall tell Miss Mercedes wants to aid her?"

"Lord Henry Essex."

"Oh! Come, now, let us think of something."

"If Miss Mercedes will openly defy her father, and—that other villain, I will openly defend her. Yet, to avoid scandal, it would, perhaps, be better to get away as quietly as possible."

Lord Henry shuddered to his inmost soul at the thought of the young lady being involved in any public difficulty. It was dreadful, to begin with, that she should be an American, with out title; but love had conquered that prejudice and urged him on this long journey, only to shock him more and more deeply with the sight of her coarse father, and the fear of her relation with that other suitor.

As Lord Henry stood there, talking with the maid he had forsworn every idea of ever asking Mercedes to be his wife; but he was too chivalric to abandon a helpless girl to her enemies; he would assist her flight, if possible.

"There is a house across the ferry, over in Oakland, where she would be safe for the present, if we could get her there; it is with Diego's mother; she is a good woman," said Maraquita, musingly. "I tell you what it is, my lord. I will send Alexander after a clergyman, when they come up from dinner, as was spoken of. I will explain to my young lady that you will be ready with a carriage, at the side entrance. We will come down, jump in, the driver will whip up his horses. Ben Brant will follow us downstairs, but he will be surprised; there will be no carriage ready for him; we will have a little the start, and will go off in the opposite direction; but turn and go to the ferry. Once across the bay, all will go right. We will dismiss the driver at the ferry, and get another carriage on the other side, so he cannot betray our whereabouts. You see?"

"Yes. The plan may work. I will run down, now, and take a cup of coffee to brace up my nerves. We may be going to meet with adventures. Shall I send something up to you?"

"It may be as well."

"I will be in readiness in half an hour. The carriage door will be open; I will stand beside it; you run down, I assist you in, jump in after you; we are saved."

"It is agreed."

Lord Henry went down to the dining-room. He was still quite pale and excited. This was the first real adventure of his life, except when he slipped down a precipice in climbing the Alps, and if he had an exaggerated idea of the danger, it must be remembered that he had heard singular accounts of the sword-eating, bloodthirsty Californians. Didn't men dine, even at the Palace Hotel, with their bowie-knives and revolvers on their persons? Were not all these quiet, affable men walking armories? Was he not almost afraid to speak, for fear some careless word would prove to be a match setting fire to a train that led to some powder magazine? Why, of course, he was in San Francisco, where the sole amusement of the population was shooting their friends on sight! We must give him credit for a large amount of courage and devotion in resolving to hazard his life in the cause of the lady he admired.

He took nothing but a cup of *café noir*. As he sipped that, he saw the other party leave the room, and overheard the comments made by those around him on Ben Brant's daughter:

"Bill Alexander in luck!" "They say he's going to marry her. Madly in love!" "Don't wonder!" "Lovely creature," "style," "wonderfully handsome," "wish I had a chance," "big bonanza!" "Ben Brant will be one of our millionaires!" "They do say they are married!" "Oh, no!" "I heard it, sure!"

Lord Henry's ears tingled. He swallowed his coffee and went out. The next hour was the longest of his life. He spent it standing on the sidewalk, his hand on the open carriage-door, his eyes glued to the entrance into the hotel. He had given the driver a double-eagle, with a hint, which led the latter to believe that an elopement was on the tapis, and this fired his romantic mind with a determination to do his best for the young couple.

"That's a mighty good-looking chap," thought the sentimental Jehu, "so I bet my bottom dollar I won't give him away, seeing as how he trusts the little affair to me. If my off hoss don't balk, we'll be all right, we will; t'other's good fur anything that a streak o' lightning's good fur. Wonder who the lady is? Whew-w-w! If 'tain't Ben Brant's beauty! There she comes! I've seen her, an' I know! There's fun on hand, now, or I'm mistaken! By the holy poker,

there's Ben hisself a-tearin' down the stairs! Hurry up, there! That's it! Whoop! glory! here we go."

The excited exclamations on the part of the driver were made to himself; he laid the whip on his team, which dashed away, angry and frightened at the force of the blows.

The loungers about the hotel were aroused to momentary attention by the sound of three or four pistol-shots following each other in rapid succession. When they reached the spot they found Ben Brant, a smoking revolver in his hand, stamping his foot and calling loudly for a carriage.

Meantime, the young lord had found himself involved in a *bona-fide* adventure. One of the flying shots had pierced the back of the carriage and entered his head.

The first thing Mercedes knew, in the terrible excitement of the flight, his head drooped over on her shoulder and she felt his warm blood running down her neck and bosom. She screamed, and begged him to speak; but he was unconscious.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHADOW STILL PURSUES.

THE evening that Esther Silverman received the earl and his son in the gilded *salon*—where was reproduced a boudoir of the time of Louis XIV.—was an epoch in her life.

A beautiful woman who had been all her life courted and flattered, Esther, since that bitter folly of her early girlhood, had felt toward men only sentiments of distrust. She had said to herself that it was impossible she should ever love. She had scorned love as a weakness meant only to betray women into unhappiness. She had held herself aloof from friendship with the other sex. Yet, really, Esther's heart was as fresh and warm as that of a girl of eighteen. She had repressed her nature; not, as she thought, destroyed it.

And now the time had come when the mighty passion which

"Rules the camp, the court, the grove,"

asserted its right to rule the haughty spirit. It was as clear a case of "falling in love" as if the actors in the little drama had been in their "teens." A polished, courtly, intelligent man; a brilliant, witty, superbly-handsome woman; both rich; both free; with no inequality of position, except that one was a "peer of the realm," and the other "an American Queen," it was not singular that the two were attracted, each by the other.

Mayfair might rage, in a polite way, when it heard of it; but there was nothing in Paris to remind the earl of Mayfair, and he gave free rein to the infatuation which whirled him on toward matrimony. The evening call was succeeded by a morning call, made *without* his son; then both came to Miss Silverman's little dinner-party that evening, from whence the guests adjourned to the opera; they had many mutual acquaintances; they met often; at the end of a week the earl, whom no one believed would marry again, made a formal offer of his heart and hand to the beautiful American.

Then the agony of her youth was renewed to Esther Silverman. That dark secret of her girlhood—the knowledge of which her proud father had carefully kept, after the tragedy in that quiet New England place, but which had gnawed at his soul until he died—was in the possession of a man who would not scruple to use it for purposes of revenge or triumph at any time when he took the fancy. She could not bring herself to confess to the earl; could she marry him and run the risk of his learning it afterward?

At first she felt that she could not so wrong this nobleman who loved her; and she sadly denied him her promise; but she was, for the first time in her life, herself in love, fathoms deep; and the struggle was so great that she finally yielded to the temptation which beset her in this sweet and fascinating guise—ventured to incur the risk—to accept present happiness and leave her future to Fate. Yet, after she had told the earl she would marry him, she trembled at every passing fancy.

The earl had enjoyed his new prospects but a day or two before he found on his table, upon rising in the morning, a note from his son, which ran something in this fashion:

"DEAR FATHER: Miss Silverman will make you a superb wife. I am glad you appreciate her. The niece is a thousand times more charming than the aunt; and if you, at your age, can forget *noblesse oblige*, I certainly, at my age, can follow suit. I am off for Havre to sail for America at noon.

"Your affectionate son,

"ALBERT LYTTON VILLIERS GASCOIGNE HENRY."

This disconcerted the earl for a whole day so

that he sent a note to his *fiancée* that he was not well enough to call on her. With him it was not a matter of deep consequence that he should marry in his own sphere, since his heir was nobly mothered; but, for his boy, that was different!

"I have made a fool of myself; I will never go to see Esther again," he said, in his vexation; but the spell was too powerful; he was lonely, and she was sweet; and he spent the evening with her, nor reproached her for his boy's disobedience.

The earl urged Esther to marry him at once; but she said that her affairs in New York required her personal attention for a few weeks, she would go home, and if he cared enough for her to come after her, he might do so in two months.

Perhaps she hoped, more than she feared, that he would never come for her; for she was frightened at her own great happiness, while the cruel words she had read kept up a melancholy refrain in her mind: "You are a murderess." "You are a murderess."

It was midsummer when she returned to New York. The most of her friends were out of the city for the hot weather. Shutters were closed all along the fashionable street on which her house stood; her home, without Mercedes, was desolate; she pined for her niece; she pined for the earl's society; and, worse than all, a cold shadow lay between her and the sunshine—a grinning skeleton looked at her from every closet; her ruined youth stared her in the face.

"I cannot endure this," she said to herself. "Better all the humiliation and horror of confession, a thousand times over, than this constant dread! If Gascoigne loves me as I love him, he will forgive me. If the truth drives him away from me, better before marriage than after. It will be easier to write to him than to talk to him; I will tell him all in a letter."

The letter was written, directed, carefully sealed—and then it lay in her desk, week after week, while other communications were exchanged; she never got courage to send it, but was always thinking she would.

One day she received a letter whose uncouth superscription she recognized with terror, mailed from San Francisco. *That* man could never have good news to write, and she opened the missive reluctantly.

"I want you to send that girl back here," it said, "or you'll be the sickest woman in New York. Her husband isn't one of the kind to give his wife up to another man. If he ever meets that Englishman you sent on here after my daughter there won't be much left of that chap. If Mrs. Alexander don't come back and give herself up to her lawful husband by one month from date of this I'm coming on to New York to *interview* you again. So, look out!"

"That girl is standing in her own light. Why, her husband is one of our biggest of big-bugs. I done well by her. She must look out she don't commit *bigamy*!! Tell her we've scared the lie out of that half-breed waiting-maid of hers. She owns up now that she did *not* take her place and get married to Alexander. She says that was a *sell* because you urged her to say so, but she wouldn't *dare* to nor didn't *want* to; that Diego is her young man. All is up with your game, Mrs. Alexander. Come home and behave and all will be forgot and forgiven."

"You tell my daughter that, for me, Esther Silverman. Then, if she don't come, *I will be there*. Don't you put her up to be disobedient to her father, and her lawful husband. Tell Mr. Essex with our compliments he'd better quit the country."

This curious communication was "all Greek" to Esther. She knew very little of what was going on in California; Mercedes had not returned to her. What could have happened to her poor darling, she could only vaguely infer from this letter.

She answered it immediately, saying that she knew nothing of her niece, and supposed her to be with her father. She would have started for California at once; but she expected the earl to arrive within a fortnight.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVE UNDER THE ROSE.

"HUSH, hush! for the love of God!" implored Maraquita, as her young lady continued to scream out that Lord Henry was killed. "The police will arrest us—what will you do then? Perhaps he is only wounded; let us pray so."

Mercedes was beside herself with grief, remorse and horror; her maid took the responsibility of ordering the carriage on to the ferry, which they soon reached. There Mercedes wanted to summon help; but Maraquita assured her that a few moments would make no great difference to the wounded man; if he were going to die, he would die—if to get well, he would get well; and they crossed the bay; while Ben Brant, in hot pursuit, had driven, as soon as he

could obtain a vehicle, pell-mell to the railroad station, expecting that his daughter would try to take the train, soon to start.

When the carriage passed off the boat, Lord Henry remaining unconscious, it became plain that they should have to trust the driver with the secret of their destination, so he was directed to drive to a certain house of a certain street in Oaklands; and there, after knocking at the door of the humble two-story dwelling, he assisted in removing Lord Henry from the coach to a bed on the second floor, the old woman who opened the door and Maraquita being his only help in so doing.

"You needn't look 's if you's dead an' buried," said this California Jehu, turning to the pale young lady, after he had given a moment's examination to the wound; "that's nothin' but a flesh wound, you bet! The scalp's ripped up fur a few inches, an' of course it bleeds. The old lady here will plaster it up all right."

"Oh, are you *sure*?" cried Mercedes, seizing hold of his rough hands.

"I'll bet my bottom dollar on it! Seen lots of pistol-shot wounds. 'Twas a narrow escape from walking through his ear into his brain; but a miss is as good as a mile; so cheer up an' don't you be downhearted, Miss Brant. He'll pan out all right."

"Ah! you know my name!" cried Mercedes. "You will not betray us, will you? You will not tell them where we are?" and, still holding his hands, she looked up coaxingly into his face with her lovely tear-filled eyes, her lips trembling.

"I never betrayed no woman's confidence yet," said the fellow, who happened to be Sam Bryce, of the old stage route before the days of the railway, "an' ef it's *in confidence*, why, it's all right! Sam Bryce don't peach on them who trust him. I've helped in more'n one runaway match, Miss Brant; an' I'll help in this, fur the sake o' them pretty bright eyes o' yours. But Ben Brant's an ugly cuss to tackle. I'll lie to him, though, an' stick to it as tight as the bark to a tree. I'll swar to him I took you to the Alameda station an' started you off fur the East. You lie low an' keep dark till your young man is well, an' I wish you j'y o' your bridal tower."

Mercedes blushed divinely and hung her lovely head.

"I'm a thousand times obliged to you, Mr. Bryce, for keeping our secret. I shall never, never forget you! But you are mistaken about—about us. I am running away; but not to get married. My father is trying to compel me to marry Mr. Alexander, and I *will not*!"

"Oho! to be sure! I *did* hear as how Bill Alexander was going to marry Brant's daughter."

"He will say that I did marry him—up in the mountains. Mr. Bryce, I *did not*. It was Maraquita, here, who married him. I dressed her in my dress and put a veil over her face, and he married her thinking it was I! That was a trick of mine because my father was going to *make* me marry him. Don't say a word about it, Mr. Bryce; only, when they pretend that Mr. Alexander has a *right* to search for me, you will know how the matter stands and will hold your peace."

"You bet! Ha! ha! ha! that's a joke on Bill! Let me tell you a secret: I don't love Mr. Gold-bug Alexander myself! He's *too* patternizing—a durned sight too patternizing! I had a quarrel with him one day, an' I threw it in his face that he was a little half-starved cuss of a boot-black in '49-50. He won't get no good out o' me! But I must be going, or my team'll go on without me. Jest you keep easy in your mind, my pretty lady; Sam Bryce is a friend o' yours as won't tell tales. Here, old lady, is a lot of stickin'-plaster. Allers carry it round with me. Cut away the hair, wash off the blood, and bring the edges together, an' dab on the plaster. Keep him on a low diet fur a day or two. Sorry I can't stay an' fix him up myself; but they may get on the track o' my carriage an' overhaul us. I want to take it away from this vicinity as soon as I kin."

"How good you are, Mr. Bryce," murmured Mercedes, actually kissing his dirty brown hand; and Sam went off, muttering:

"She shouldn't 'a' s'iled her rosy lips on my hand ef I'd a-knowed it in time. Bless her sweet eyes! she don't put on no airs like Bill. I'd stand up an' be shot 'fore I'd blow on her! She ain't no mushroom bondholder, she ain't, nor no bloated aristocrat, like Kearney tells about. She's a sweet, modest, perlitte young lady, an' handsome as an angel. I'll stan' by her, against her own daddy, or anybuddy else."

And so he did; for the following morning he misled Alexander completely as to the direction

in which he had taken the runaways, nor did he let Brant have the satisfaction of knowing that he had wounded the Englishman.

For a day or two they supposed Mercedes was on her way back to New York; but a series of telegrams to and from the conductors of the train assured them such was not the case.

The keen sting of jealousy was added to Alexander's rage, since Ben had told him the two women did not go off alone. He swore some strong oaths that he would have his way, and revenge into the bargain.

Pressing business at the Josephine mines demanded Brant's speedy return; so, after writing to Esther Silverman, in case his daughter had or should find her way back to her aunt, he left the affair for the present in Alexander's hands.

The "gold-bug" had every policeman in the city acting in his interest, keeping a sharp lookout for any one of the three people described to them.

A large reward was promised to the one who should put Alexander on the right track. This hunt extended to the steamers and nearest railway stations; so that it seemed as if our trio could not long remain hidden in the place where they were.

Yet two or three weeks slipped away without their retreat being discovered.

The Englishman's baggage remained unclaimed at the hotel. Alexander nursed his wrath, longing for the hour of revenge. If he could anywhere have met or found Lord Henry he would have shot him on sight. Yet he knew nothing of him except that he had aided Mercedes to run away.

Alexander knew, in his heart, that the two women had outwitted him, and that he had married the humble Maraquita; but he refused to acknowledge it even to himself, so determined was he now to have the proud Mercedes.

His course, therefore, was to affirm that she was his wife, and so he gave out the night of the runaway, at the hotel, and afterward.

When asked what he married a woman for who did not want to live with him, he answered that she had wedded him willingly enough and really loved him; but that "infernal jade, Maraquita had told her some stories which had rendered her furious with jealousy, and she had gone off in a flurry; he had no doubt she would return to him when her fit of the sulks was over!"

Meantime, in the little home of Diego's mother, was being lived one of those chapters of romance which are worth all the rest of the prosaic story of life.

The wound had proven to be as slight as Sam Bryce predicted. The shock had produced unconsciousness and there was considerable loss of blood—just enough to lend an interesting pallor to the young face of the hero, and to produce in him that state of languid sensibility most delicately alive to the charming impressions made upon him by the visits of the exquisite being in whose cause he had received his injury.

The old woman took care of him, Maraquita cooked his broths and his porter house steak when that was allowed, but Mercedes entertained him.

When the hostess went to market the young lady always sent for a fresh bouquet of white half-blown roses and unfolding buds, and these she herself carried in to the invalid. She wanted to read to him, but there were no books in the house, and to send for any by the illiterate old woman would be to invite suspicion. Neither she nor Maraquita dared so much as to appear before the windows. Thus, being unable to procure reading matter, it became her duty to make conversation take the place of books for an hour or two every morning and evening.

Lord Henry got to know quite intimately the tastes, fancies and ideas of the beautiful girl with whom he had fallen truly in love at first sight.

The better he became acquainted with her the more he liked her and admired her. The admiration was mutual.

Yet the first word of love had yet to be spoken. The strange circumstances in which the young lady was involved, were an insuperable barrier to the expression of his passion to the proud young Englishman. Mercedes had given him, the first day she had found him able to listen, a brief history of her acquaintance with Mr. Alexander; and though now she saw many reasons why she should not have placed herself in a false position by allowing Mr. Alexander for six weeks, to suppose her his wife, and bitterly regretted having taken that way out of her difficulties—a way, which at the time, she

thought would not only free herself, but right poor Maraquita—it did not render the situation any the less embarrassing and insecure.

Lord Henry found fault with her for having done what she did; he was evidently troubled at the thought of her father, and the mystery involving her not knowing until recently that her father was alive; yet did this keep the flash from lighting up his blue eyes when he heard her knock at his door? Did it keep the blood from flushing his pale face and tingling and throbbing in his pulses? Did it keep his voice from softening when he spoke to her? Was her company any the less dear to him?

Ah! magic and witchery that comes with the society of her one loves! Delicate fascination! Fine as the silver gossamer of the spider's silken web, yet strong as filaments of steel, are the meshes of the web that twines about the lover and binds him to her he loves!

Mercedes only too well realized that she was involved in desperate trouble and dire doubt, but none the less the present hour was full of delicious happiness. She could not "look before or after," or "pine for what was not." The only man in the world who could call the blush to her cheeks and the thrill to her bosom was here in this poor little house, with her! They were prisoners together. He had periled his life for her! Oh, how beautiful and wonderful, how wise and considerate, how good and delicate he was!

It was no hardship for her to be shut up here so long as Lord Henry remained. All the grace and glory of earth were to be found in those four poor walls of a little hot plain house, baking in the summer's sun.

Mercedes pondered much over the little grain of information he vouchsafed her in regard to Aunt Esther and his father.

"I'm quite certain they intend to marry each other," Lord Henry said, and then the two had looked at each other and both had blushed, and Mercedes had murmured, "How singular!"

But now, alas! the young gentleman was getting well frightfully fast! There was no longer an excuse for his keeping to his bed or his room. No excuse for his lingering day after day in the little sitting room. He must send for his luggage—he must go away—back to England.

About this time Sam Bryce paid them an evening visit, bringing a part of my lord's luggage with him, which he had deftly extracted from the baggage room, when sent for trunks belonging to other travelers. Henry was grateful, and showed that he was; Mercedes smiled her very brightest on the ex-stage-driver. Sam gave the news—that Brant had returned to the mines—that Alexander had engaged the police to keep a sharp look-out for "his wife," and had privately sworn to shoot "the blank English puppy on sight." The young lady gave Sam a purse she had knit for him out of silk and gold beads, which pleased him mightily.

As it was a very dark night my lord ventured to walk a few steps with him, on his way back to the station.

"Why don't you marry the young lady an' make tracks afore her father gits back, or t'other one shoots you?" Sam asked, in guarded tones, as his noble friend walked by his side.

The haughty color burned on the young lord's cheek at the implication that "her father" might object to him! This was turning the tables with a vengeance! That rough old miner object to an earl's son! Henry thought of his home at Roselm, his palace in Mayfair, his place at court, and almost laughed, only he was too unhappy about the matter to enjoy its ludicrous side.

"I shall not run away for fear a braggart might assassinate me," was the rather lofty reply. "As to her father, if I were certain that Miss Brant was legally free from the scoundrel who claims her as his wife, I should be quite willing to defy him. It is the matter of the pretended marriage that troubles me, Mr. Bryce."

"Now, just you marry the girl an' yer all right. That little black-eyed critter is the real wife, no mistake. You don't run no resk thar, my friend. An' you won't be makin' sech a bad match, nuther, ef ye are got a title tacked on to the tail of yer name. Most folks likes money. Money covers a multitude o' sins. Money's good to have, even for an earl's son. They tell me Ben Brant's got silver enough to build a ten-acre house outen the solid bricks, an' enough left over to rail in a perrarie, an' gold enough fur trimmin's. He's the owner of a bona fide bonanza, he is; an' a little of that ar' silver would go good to enrich the worn-out sile o' yer paternal estates. Put that in yer daddy's pipe, an' smoke it! To say nothin' of the beauty of that ar' partikular girl! I'm proud of her as a specimen, I am! Yer needn't tell me thar's any

such ladies where you come from. Queen Victory's daughters can't hold a candle to Miss Mercedes!"

The young nobleman was unused to hearing such familiar talk from an inferior; hardly knowing whether to resent it or take it good-naturedly, he kept silent.

"Bill Alexander's actooaly growing thin," went on Sam, unabashed. "He's fretting himself to a shadder. I tole him yesterday he'd do to cut bread with, he was gittin' so sharp. Fur my part, I'm sure, that little black eyed witch, Keety, is good enough fur him. That gal will do some mischief, yit, sure's my name's Sam Bryce! It's in her! I'd ruther fool with a three-year-old colt than a woman with them eyes! You can git out o' the way of a colt's heels, but you can't guard ag'in' a jealous girl what you've made false promises to. Them's my sentiments."

"Perhaps you are right," Lord Henry felt he must make some answer—"but she seems a gentle, kind creature."

"Of course, of course! Them kind is gentle, an' good, an' self-denyin', an' can't do enough for you, an' all that!—as long as you treat 'em right. But, lie to 'em, an' deceive 'em, an' see how the fire will flash! I tell you, sir, it strikes me that Keety's broodin' an' broodin'; an' somethin' will come of it!"

"Well, I'm much obliged to you for all your kindness, Mr. Bryce; and I'll bid you good-night, now."

"Good-night, sir; an' if thar's news, I'll contrive to let you know."

"Thank you. I've made up my mind to leave here day-after-to-morrow."

Sam Bryce opened his mouth very wide; then shut it again without saying anything.

"An' leave her behind, you pale-livered English cuss!" was what he wanted to exclaim.

Lord Henry regained the little house where he had spent the very happiest hours of a happy life, full of serious thought, pondering what he should do. The most important decision of his life had to be made. He could not remain on and on, indefinitely, in that humble home, as he would have liked. He owed it to his father to explain where he was. He owed it to Mercedes either to avow himself, or quit her society at once and forever. He knew that she loved him and that he madly worshiped her. Yet, what could he do?

What he wanted to do was this: to see Mercedes safely back in her aunt's house in New York. Once again under her aunt's protection, they could afford to wait a few months and be married in a proper and dignified way when they were married. Meantime, this Alexander must be silenced. "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion," Lord Henry revolted at the thought of his wife being the subject of gossip.

He had been informed by Bryce that Alexander had hired men to watch the departing passengers of every train, not only from the city itself, but every station within fifty miles. So he knew that if he attempted to escort the young lady to any train, there would be an unpleasant scene.

He was so sad and lost in thought that Mercedes, feeling that the hour of their separation drew nigh, grew very pale and silent.

She grew indignant, too. Her heart throbbed painfully with the heavy consciousness that Lord Henry's love was no match for her own. Would she have hesitated? Would any cloud of sorrow or scandal about him have kept her away if he had called?

Suddenly turning his gaze upon her, he saw her lithe figure drawn up with its proudest expression, and that those beautiful eyes were fixed upon him with pity and reproach.

This made him see his own hesitation in its true light. He arose and went toward her, passionate words on his lips, when Maraquita, blanched and wide-eyed, rushed into the room, whispering:

"Fly, fly! Hide somewhere, my dear mistress! Alexander is at the door, with three officers," and as she spoke a loud knock almost shook the little house.

CHAPTER XVII.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

"WHERE shall I fly?" cried Mercedes, darting to a door which opened into a back room, used as a kitchen by Diego's mother.

At that instant the frail front door yielded to the pressure applied and four men rushed into the little sitting-room.

With a faint scream Mercedes fled to the outer door of the kitchen; but when she opened it a policeman stood there and she shrunk back again.

She could not reach the staircase, for it opened out of the sitting-room; so she stood

there, trembling until the officer pushed her by the shoulders into the parlor, saying to Alexander:

"Here is your wife."

"Yes, in pretty company, too! Curse it, Brant, is this the sort of woman you foisted on me?—runs away from her lawful husband to stay in the same house with a man who isn't her husband! Ha, ha, ha!"

Lord Henry had sprung to his feet when the knock was heard. He stood by his chair confronting the intruders, yet quite helpless to protect the lady, since the only weapon he had, a small pistol, was up stairs under his pillow.

He never knew, until that moment, that he was a man. He had doubted his courage and despised himself when he realized how timid he felt about the false position Mercedes was in.

But when the man stood before him who had come to tear her away—when he heard the coarse insinuations of that man—there was first a tiger of jealousy raging within him, and second, a lion of noble rage at hearing the woman he loved insulted.

"Take care," he cried, in a voice low from the very intense concentration of his passion. "I shall protect this young lady from such insults. I am unarmed at present, sir; but you cannot hope to live very long if you dare to calumniate this lady."

"I shall do what I please with my own!" was the insolent reply. "These officers will see that I am secure in my legal right to claim possession of my wife."

"Your wife is quite willing to go without compulsion whenever you demand," spoke up Maraquita, stepping up before Alexander, and looking full in his face. "I am your wife. You know it. There was a ceremony legally performed by Father Ignatius, which made me your wife. He is deceiving you," she added, to the officers. "It was I he married. Beware that you do not become parties to a crime."

"Get out of my way!" said the gold-bug, with an oath, and, in his fury, he struck Maraquita a stinging blow on the cheek.

"Bill, it would have been better for you not to have done that," she muttered; but he did not hear her—did not care; he had advanced and sought to take Mercedes by the arm, but she sprung behind Lord Henry, and put her hand to her bosom!

Brant had said nothing yet, but stood looking on with a savage smile.

"Go home with your husband, you hussy!" he now shouted.

"He is not my husband, father."

"What is that other fellow to you, that you should get behind him?"

Mercedes blushed.

Lord Henry turned himself partly around and looked tenderly at her; then he faced the others again. No hesitation, no shrinking now.

"I am one who hopes, some day, to be so fortunate as to be her true and loving husband. You are her father, sir. Let me say a word to you. I met your daughter at Miss Silverman's, and loved her. I had no chance to tell her so, for you came for her that night of our first meeting. I went back to England unable to see her again. But I could not forget her. Learning that she was somewhere in California, I traveled over seas and mountains in the hope of finding her and telling her that she was the one woman in the world to me. I reached the Palace Hotel, San Francisco, the day before you arrived there with your daughter. My room adjoined yours, and I overheard, through the open transom, enough of your conversation to convince me that the lady I loved—to save whom from the slightest shadow of shame or grief I would give my life—was about to be forced into a union unutterably hateful to her. I resolved to offer my aid to escape from the danger. I assisted her in getting away, and Maraquita, here, found a place of concealment. When I aided her flight from the hotel, I expected to quit her the first moment she was safe; but a wound in the head, from one of the pistols you fired after us, disabled me, so that I have been kept here under the care of Maraquita and Mrs. Lopez. Being now well enough to go, I had made my plans to leave day after to-morrow. I have not even—until this moment—told your daughter that I loved her. Her circumstances were such as to demand prudence and patience on my part. I tell you now, sir, that I choose her for my wife, if she will do me the grace to have me. Perhaps you know who I am—Henry, only son of the Earl of Essex. I have lived an honorable life, and if you will consider my claims, you will find me, perhaps, as worthy of your daughter's hand as any man can be of so priceless a gift."

"You are too late, my lord," sneered Alexander, without waiting for Brant to frame a reply. "The lady you are so kind as to admire is already my wife. It will be for the interest of all that you permit her to depart with me, without more words."

"I am not and never will be his wife," reiterated Mercedes, appealing to the police officer. "Maraquita took my place before the altar. It was a deception I had to practice in self-defense."

"It seems to be a mixed-up affair," remarked the officer of police. "If the lady don't care for you, Alexander, why don't you let her go? 'There's as good fish in the sea as ever were caught.'"

"I didn't ask you for your advice, Robbins. I brought you here to help me in securing my rights. Dash you! if you don't do it, I'll see to it you are dismissed from the force before the week is out."

"Well, so be it. Come on, young lady. You must go with your husband. Girl, bring her a shawl an' bonnet, will you?"

The four intruders advanced to seize one poor, weak girl.

"Brave men!" cried Lord Henry, keeping himself between Mercedes and them.

"Stand out of my way," snarled the gold-bug. "I only want a good excuse for shooting you like a dog." His revolver was in his hand, his thin gray face looked wicked and reckless.

Lord Henry did not blanch.

"Stand out of my way!"

"Do not touch the lady!"

The two men eyed each other. The colder blood of the Englishman was warmed, thoroughly. His steel-blue eyes shot sparks of fire. The Californian raised his weapon. Swiftly, unexpectedly, lighter than a cat, my lord sprung upon him, with a left-handed blow in the stomach of his adversary which laid the latter flat, while the revolver flew ten feet away. Lord Henry pounced upon it, before the other could catch his breath.

Swearing a big oath, Ben Brant fired at the Englishman; but the pistol snapped without doing any injury.

"My quarrel is not with you," Lord Henry said, calmly.

And then a pair of arms went about Ben's neck, nearly strangling him; he could not tear them away; they clung like a wildcat's. "Father, don't shoot! If you kill him; you kill me!"

"Let go of me, you little wench! Here, Robbins, take her off!"

"Father, I love him! I love him!"

"Don't shoot!—there's no sense in your laying yourself liable to the charge of manslaughter, Brant," cried the officer, pulling the soft white arms of the girl from around her father's neck. "Don't get into a scrape that you will be sorry for—don't! Come, I'll take the young lady along. There need be no further trouble." He kept his rough hand on the tender shoulder of Mercedes. "Come along with that shawl an' bonnet," he continued, to Maraquita.

By this time Alexander was on his feet again. He had lost his revolver—that was in the hands of the enemy—but, mad and blind with fury and hatred, he drew a common jack-knife from his pocket, opened a blade, and rushed at the young man who had once repulsed him.

"Stand back!" shouted the latter, in a warning voice.

"It's your life or mine," panted the gold-bug, between his clenched teeth.

But the grim mouth of the weapon pointed at his heart. For half a second the two antagonists looked each other in the eye. Even then Lord Henry was sufficiently cool to reflect upon the folly of wanton murder; neither did he wish to injure this man unnecessarily; but he was determined to defend himself.

"I call upon you, officers of the law, to observe that I act solely in self-defense," he said, quite calmly.

Brant half dropped his leveled pistol to watch those two; the straining eyes of Mercedes, as she shrunk from the heavy hand of Robbins, were fixed upon them, wide-dilated with dread; Maraquita, her blooming face grown yellow and shrunk as an autumn leaf, also gazed at them sternly. The mark of her lover's hand was purple along one side of her cheek, and she made no effort to aid him.

It had been a close, sultry August day; and the evening also had been still and hot; the usual sea-fog and cold sea-air seemed not to have come to the relief of oppressed humanity; in that little room the atmosphere was suffocating, but its occupants had something to think of besides the heat.

Alexander came closer; he was evidently

watching an opportunity to make a thrust, at the same time that he was on guard against surprise, after that first lesson.

The officers should have interfered, yet were themselves fascinated, as men will ever be, by the exciting display of passions that had gone beyond all mastery. Instead of thrusting themselves between the two combatants, they hung with breathless interest upon the gray face, the scowling brows, the glowing eyes and lips drawn away from the glistening white teeth of the Californian.

They silently wondered if he would spring, with that glittering weapon aimed steadily by a hand of steel.

Brant was alarmed. He was certain that his friend would be killed. The first movement made was his again raising his own arm to shoot the Englishman in Alexander's defense. One of his charges had failed him; but the others probably would not.

All were so intent upon the two that no one saw him point his weapon at Lord Henry. Not that he cared to kill him, but that he would not see his friend endangered. His finger on the trigger, his aim exact—he fired.

This time the charge was all right—no fizzling then!

Even at the very instant his revolver was discharged, something strange occurred. The little house shivered. There was a sort of low murmur, and throbbing of the hitherto lifeless air.

The floor moved under the feet of Ben Brant as he pulled the trigger, so that the shot which should have gone to the heart of the man it was intended for took an oblique impulse, entering the wall several inches above his head.

"An earthquake! an earthquake!" screamed Diego's mother.

Again there was a low grumble and grinding of the earth; the house shook more violently than before; the sash rattled.

Maraquita sprung to catch the lamp, but it tumbled to the floor, broke, and spread the fiery oil in every direction; a picture of the Holy Family fell with a crash; the door flew open, and fortunate was it that it did, for if it had, as often happens, become firmly closed from a sinking of the frame, they might all have been burned together.

A large spatter of the blazing oil fell on Alexander's hand. His fury was no match for that of the elements. To perish in a burning house was not an inviting prospect. He made a rush, with the others, for the street. The earth continued to rise and fall with a sickening, frightful swell beneath their feet. The air was full of dust; the lamps along the way had been extinguished by the shock; people were running about, children screaming.

Mercedes, giddy and frightened, reached the middle of the street and stood there in the darkness and the crowd of people.

A warm hand laid hold of her little cold one.

"Come, let us lose no time! Providence has interfered in our behalf. Come, come, my darling!"

It was Lord Henry's voice, eager and thrilling with gladness, through all the terror of the moment. He had never before spoken to her with that abandonment to his love and tenderness, and her heart responded with a great throb of joy.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I do not know. It matters not. Away from them!"

But the fiery heart of the earth was rent with a still fiercer pang; Mercedes, clinging confidently to the hand of the one she trusted, was thrown down; but she struggled up again, feeling sick and strange, and the two staggered on, while the light of the burning house arose behind them.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"PUT OUT THE LIGHT."

MISS SILVERMAN lingered in the luxurious drawing-room of her house, all alone, but happy—happier than she had been since she was a girl of sixteen, and still, not free from gnawing care.

Would she ever be free from that?

To-night she put it away—would not remember that she had it—would not open the door of the closet which hid the skeleton—would not remember the dull pain always feeding on her proud spirit.

She was happy. And she enjoyed her happiness all the more from its being so rare a thing. As she walked up and down the long, lighted room—sweet with quantities of flowers, delightful with *bric-a-brac*, rich with pictures and pleasant with sumptuous furniture—the bloom

of her girlhood was on her fine face. The coy gladness of one about to become a bride flushed her cheeks and shone in her lustrous, midnight eyes.

The earl had just left her to return to his hotel. It was the first day of September; they were to be married on the third. The wedding was to be very quiet: the summer wanderers were not returned, as the weather was still warm; and Esther preferred surprising her friends by the news of her marriage, after the ceremony was over, to giving a great reception.

Yes, she was very happy! She would not think about other matters. With a wave of her slender white hand she consigned the possible rack to its limbo. She was going to be married to a gentleman worthy of her; then she would go with him across the seas, and all these life-long troubles of hers would be left behind.

Happy, happy at last!

Mercedes was up-stairs, asleep, like a little child once more, in her own room. She had been up to steal a look at her once since the earl went away, a half-hour ago.

Just a week ago that day she had been surprised—and still she was always expecting it!—by the return of her darling.

Pale, weary, grave, and yet bright as a star with a still light of her own, Mercedes had come back! Lord Henry was with her. She had traveled under his care from San Francisco—or from the station nearest Alameda, where they had taken the cars the night of the earthquake. Henry and Mercedes were betrothed lovers now. Not that they expected to marry for some time. That California matter should be settled beyond dispute before they talked of marriage; but the understanding between them was complete, and they were content and hopeful.

Esther knew the whole story. She recalled Brant's threatening letter. She felt that he would soon be on to New York with the purpose of making trouble. Yet she hardly thought he would follow immediately. It would take him a few days to make sure that Mercedes had left California. Meantime, Esther would be married, and sail for England, taking her niece with her. Once safe, with the Atlantic between them, she did not believe Ben Brant would persecute either of them any further. He would doubtless reflect that an earl's son was as good a *parti* for his daughter as a bonanza king, and would have sense enough to let matters take their course.

Esther knew that it was not impossible for Brant to arrive any hour, as ugly and obstinate as ever. But, she put the thought aside. There was a fascination about being hopeful and happy; why should she torment herself with vague fears?

Even if Brant *did* come and *did* threaten, what would he do? Have her arrested for a murder, committed while she was temporarily insane, eighteen years ago? Ah! that made her shudder! Not that she anticipated the law would hang, or imprison for life, a woman of her position, who had done the deed in a moment of actual madness, not even knowing or remembering—except in the vaguest way—that she did do it.

It was not fear of punishment by rope or cell that made this haughty woman quail. No. It was the far more terrible prospect of the betrayal, before the whole world, of the folly of hers and her dead sister's—those secret marriages to unfit men—which had killed her sister, made her a murderess, and driven their father to an earlier grave.

Could she *live* and have the earl told of that?

Could she acknowledge that vagabond who went under the assumed name of Brant her sister's husband and the father of that beautiful niece on whom she had lavished all treasures of culture and position? Could the cold public be made to realize that, in his youth, this rough miner had been handsome and pleasing to a girl's eye, with a certain jaunty grace and affectation of refinement which had since been lost in his rude struggle with life in a new country?

It was these things which would be a thousand times bitterer than death.

Esther, with a joyous inner consciousness that Fate could have nothing so cruel in store for her, paced up and down the long breadth of velvet carpet, humming the words of a love-song, too happy, in too exalted a state of mind, to feel the drowsy spells of sleep.

Mephistopheles sat nodding and napping in the hall. He was in a splendid good-humor with himself and everybody else. The sweet young missa was home again; Miss Silverman was going to marry an earl; an' the young lord, he reckoned, wouldn't be long in following his

father's example, and shining up to Missa Mercedes. So he nodded complacently, dreaming of wedding-cake, until a sharp pull at the bell-handle roused him from pleasant musings.

That sharp ring aroused Esther from her sweet dreams, also. It struck harshly into her song and silenced it. It was like hearing one's death-bell toll. She put her hand to her heart, standing still, waiting. The factotum came in with a card; he looked solemn as an owl, as he handed it to his mistress. He had known of that person being admitted at a late hour once before, and that his mistress had had trouble with the fellow; she had been ill after it; and young missa had gone off very mysteriously.

He watched Miss Silverman's countenance anxiously while she looked at the name on the card, and when she raised her dark, startled eyes and fixed them on his with an expression of hopeless terror, he shook his head deprecatingly, as much as to say—"Don't have nothing to do with a low personage like that, my honored mistress."

"I must. I must see him again!"

"Ef you don't like to, *don't* you do it, madame! He sha'n't come in, ef you don't want to see him."

"Mephistopheles, I believe this is killing me. Oh, heaven! how happy I was only a moment ago! And now—"

"Can I do anything?" asked the old servant, wistfully. "Kick him down the steps, or call the police?"

"No, no, no! This person has it in his power to injure me. I can only manage him by coaxing him. Admit him, and be civil to him, Mephistopheles. It is necessary."

The servant went away reluctantly; the next minute Brant entered the drawing-room, banging the door behind him, and marched up before its haughty mistress. He was dressed up this time. His face was shaved, his hair close-cut, he wore a rich suit of broadcloth, with a heavy gold watch-chain showing, and kid gloves, which fitted him tolerably.

"Is my daughter in this house, Miss Silverman?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I want her to put on her duds and come with me."

"Where?"

"None of *your* business!"

"But it *is* my business, Mr. Brant! It is true, she is your daughter. She is also my sister's child, and *mine* by all that makes a child the person's who rears it. I brought up that child, watched over her infancy, cared for her every day and hour, until you, a stranger to her, who had never given her a night's watching, or paid a dollar for the bread that fed her, or clothing she wore, or books she studied, came and took her away. Is she most your child or mine? Who made her what she is? Who gave her culture, refinement, all that makes her the lovely girl upon whose charms you would now trade? Oh, for shame! You, who never lost an hour's sleep for her sake, tear her from me, and go deliberately to work to break her heart! You, who are rough and wicked, would fain degrade her to your level! Ah! go away, and leave her in peace with me. See! I *kneel* to you! I kneel to you, whom once my sister loved and died for, to spare her child. You only make her wretched; why should you trouble her? She will marry so as to do you honor, if you will only leave her to me; she will be grateful to you, and so learn in time to love you. Ah! go away, without trying to injure us, and we will be happy and so will you."

"I can't afford it," answered Brant, with an ugly smile. "Get up off your knees, Miss Silverman; you make me uncomfortable. I can't afford it. What do I care for your lords and fine gentlemen that will always despise me? I wanted my girl to marry a friend of mine—one who had mutual interests with me, and was well able to take care of her—and I made a match between them; and the matter has gone too far now to be canvassed; for she's his wife, and we've got the documents to prove it. Mercy's acted like a fool. But she must quit it. Alexander's on, with me; and we intend to settle this at once."

"Mercedes affirms that she is *not* married to that person."

"Oh yes, she is, as tight as a priest could join them. 'Twas all right, and she as pleasant as buttered parsnips, and going to Frisco to meet him, and all smooth and agreeable till she set eyes on that cursed Englishman, in the hotel, and then she was all up in arms against Alexander, pretending it was not her who stood up with him! My lord may be a fancy chap, and a favorite with the ladies; but that hasn't anything

to do with the main point. I picked out my daughter's husband. He's one of my kind; and he's lent me money to go and develop my mines; and I'm under obligations to him, and *sworn* to fight his battles. It's been a mighty inconvenience for me to leave my business to come on here. I ain't in just the humor to be coaxed, you bet your life on *that*!"

"Hear to reason, Ben Brant! What is this you would do to your child? You *know* she is not that man's wife, yet you would aid in placing her in his arms!"

"She can have the ceremony done over if 'twill make her feel any better."

"Make her feel any better? It will kill her, or she will take her own life before she will submit to the enforced marriage so hateful to her. Why, she abhors the man."

"Fah! Didn't she consent to it all—wasn't she married without any protest, and didn't she go down to Frisco to meet her husband, according to agreement, *say*?"

"It was all a foolish ruse on her part. Her folly was only a little less than that of mine and my poor sister's. But, she did it to escape your persecutions. She never dreamed but, at the first avowal of the trick, you would see that she had baffled you, and then, being no longer alone in the mines with you but in a city full of people, you would not dare carry the matter further. Ah, let her alone! Let her sleep in peace. She is worn out with trouble. Let her be."

"I did not come on here, at a time when every day is worth a little fortune, to be wheedled or cajoled. I came on to make trouble, and I'm bound to make it! Use your influence with Mercedes to reconcile her to Mr. Alexander, and I will keep the peace. He's a nice fellow—nothing against him—no bad habits—looked up to in Frisco—and is rich as twenty finified my lords. You have great influence over the girl. If you will, you can induce her to do as I want her to. Get her to go quietly back with us. To satisfy her, we will have the ceremony done over, as I said. It can be done quietly here in this room to-morrow. I shall come here with my friend at ten in the morning. You can select your own parson; we shall be ready if you are. If you send the girl away, or make a fuss in any way, you know what to expect. Nor will it save Mercy. I have in my pocket the certificate of marriage with the names and date, signed by Father Ignatius."

"I will think about it," was all Esther could say.

"Think to some purpose or you're a ruined person," returned Brant. "I'm going away now. I sha'n't bother you any more to-night. Only bear this in mind—I'm in dead earnest. There's been too much fooling."

Mephistopheles, fidgeting in the hall, was much relieved to find the obnoxious visitor making so brief a stay. He showed him out with marked deference, according to his lady's orders to be civil, and shut the door on him with a great deal of pleasure.

Miss Silverman came out into the hall the next moment.

"Put out the lights. I am going to retire," she said.

"Put out the light," and still, "put out the light," she murmured to herself, as she crept up-stairs with weary steps, the old servant looking after her anxiously and noticing her drooping figure.

The glorious harvest moon was shining down into the two tall windows of her room as she entered it. Rosine came in, but she sent her to bed. Standing by one of the windows, the silver flood of moonlight fell on a gray, dreary face, and slender, listless hands, the gems on whose fingers scarcely flashed, so still they lay folded on one another.

"We might go away to some remote part of the world, she and I," she thought; "but, what would that avail us? My happiness is lost again—*lost forever*! I will not see the earl again! He shall not be dragged into this humiliating, sickening trouble. He shall return, unfettered, to his home, without his garments even brushing this scandal. I will write him a note, presently, that will end our engagement. But, my door shall not open to that scoundrel to-morrow. I will find some way to protect my darling. They shall not have her! I will thwart them there! Sooner would I see my beautiful child laid out in her coffin than they should even look at her! They may do as they please about revenging themselves on me. I know what Ben Brant has threatened and what he will do. Very well. I am in his power, as he said; but Mercedes is not. I will try not to think of myself. Alas, does Heaven think my punishment has not been severe enough?—that I

yet have no right to happiness and peace? No peace—no peace," and a low, tremulous wail, pitiful indeed, came from the ashen lips.

CHAPTER XIX.

"HAVE YOU ANY ANSWER, MADAME?"

As the Earl of Essex was taking his breakfast in his room the following morning a note was brought to him by one of the waiters.

He smiled to himself as he cut open the envelope, for he knew the handwriting; but the words which he read were not the love-words he expected, and his countenance changed from "lively to severe" as he read:

"MY DEAR GASCOIGNE:

"Since I parted from you last evening something has occurred to me of sufficient importance to change our relations completely. To explain this would only give you pain and me much distress. I must beseech you not to ask for any explanations, but to drop the acquaintance at once and entirely, and forget, as soon as possible, that such a person ever existed as your unhappy friend

"Tuesday night. ESTHER SILVERMAN."

"This is an astonishing note to receive from the lady one was to marry on the morrow! Read it, Henry," exclaimed the earl, after sending the servant away, to his son, who had just sauntered into his room looking bright and happy.

The earl's voice was sharp and strained while the hand in which he extended the note to his son shook a little. On reading it Henry changed color and walked about uneasily.

"Can you let in a ray of light upon this strange missive?—is it the fashion for American ladies to thus discard their lovers at the eleventh hour—or is there really some serious trouble here?"

"I know nothing about it, father. Miss Silverman, I am sure, is a woman who would do nothing lightly or for other than the best of reasons. I am afraid something very serious has transpired."

In his heart Henry was filled with dismay. He inferred that this *bete noir* of a father might have appeared upon the scene, and he trembled. He knew that the earl would never—however madly in love—form an alliance with a family disgraced by such a representative. He had told his father that Mercedes's parent was a wealthy California speculator, hoping that the truth might be kept from him for the present. He had introduced Mercedes to the earl with pride, knowing that his critical relative could find no fault with the young lady.

Now, he feared the vulgarity and obstinacy of Ben Brant. But, his worst anticipations fell far short of the wretched truth with regard to that man. The catastrophe hovering over the two ladies was darker and more hopeless than anything the young man imagined.

"With your permission, father, I will go at once and try to see Miss Silverman."

"I wish you would. It's a bore to have one's appetite spoiled in this fashion. Have you breakfasted?"

"Yes, father. And now I will be off, hoping to return with something from Miss Silverman more encouraging than that note."

It was far from the fashionable hour for morning calls when Henry rung Miss Silverman's door-bell—not more than half-past nine.

He was admitted by Mephistopheles, and met by Miss Silverman at the door of the drawing-room. She looked as she did that other morning when he had called and found he was not to see her niece—pale, grave, with dark circles under her brilliant eyes. Before she had spoken a word his heart sunk down like lead. He felt a presentiment that he would not meet Mercedes.

"If it had been the earl I would not have seen him," she began, hurriedly. "Oh, my poor, breaking heart! Yes, Henry, my heart can break, as well as yours! I love your father, and fate tears me from him. Henry, Mercedes has gone!"

"Gone?"

"You need not look quite so horrified. She is not yet in their hands. But they are here, for her! They come armed with such appearance of authority that I tremble for my poor, persecuted darling. In a few moments both those men will be here—but I have sent her away!—she is not in the house—nor do I believe they will find her. So, take heart! But this Brant will be so angry with me I shall be made to suffer the full force of his fury, and—and—it is true, Henry, that he has me in his power—that he can harm me irremediably—make me a horror to your father—drag my name before the public—write my name on the prison records! Oh, I have delayed confessing all to the earl, though the story has been on my lips a dozen times! It was a hard story for me to compel myself to explain to him, and I have put it off from time to time; and now, tell him, that I can never—will never—see him again. Beg him to forgive me for dragging him into my trouble! Beg him to pity me—not to utterly despise me!"

Tears were streaming down her face; she stood the image of despair. Lord Henry shrunk a little away from this elegant woman whom he had always admired; he regarded her with a sort of dismay.

"Miss Silverman, it is not possible that you—that you—have done anything—" he could not finish the sentence.

"Ah! I cannot tell you! I wish to God you might never have to hear it! Yet, by to-morrow—to-morrow, perhaps—you will read it, blazoned on the page of every newspaper you pick up. Yes, let me tell you, before those men come here, that I am a *murderess*! It is true. You may better hear it from my lips than from theirs. I took the life of a fellow-creature! It was years ago. I was insane at the time—but I did the deed."

He could not remove his eyes from hers, which

sought his and held them with a wild, intense look, full of horror and grief. The shock of her admission made him pale and cold; he stepped back as if he wanted to place a great distance between her and himself, but he could not tear his eyes from hers. The sunshine seemed to fade out of the room and out of his life, leaving everything chill and gray. In losing his regard and reverence for this woman he knew that he lost Mercedes, too. It was true!—his father must not marry a murderess; nor must he wed a murderess's *protegee*.

Oh, what hideous shadow was this settling over his young love? He would return to the hotel; was there a steamer sailed to-day?—and his father and himself would flee this disastrous country.

A sickening sense of desolation almost overpowered him.

"Yes, I did it. There was a story ran before the deed. I cannot tell it to you. You will know it soon enough. If I were to confess to the earl what I have to you, he would look at me as you do, and that would kill me! Ah, go away! I cannot bear your look! Is it *thus* the world will gaze at me hereafter?"

She buried her face in her hands to shut out his eyes.

"Farewell!" murmured Lord Henry, in broken tones. "It is as well that I should go. We can do each other no good."

He went out of the house like a man walking in his sleep. As he descended the steps two men passed him going up them. He did not even see them, nor know that he had encountered Ben Brant and the gold-bug of Frisco.

Ben paused, intending to speak; but seeing that something not pleasant preoccupied his lordship, he concluded not to address him.

"Don't look altogether happy, does he, Bill?"

"Curse him!" was Alexander's only comment.

He was not in the best of humors; neither was Brant. Every hour and moment of their time, this season, was precious—worth, nobody knows how many silver bricks—and their chase of Mercedes was made at a sad disadvantage to them. He was urged on by a seething, fiery passion of jealousy, while Brant was willing to do *anything* to please the man from whom he had borrowed money to open his wonderful bonanza, and of whom he desired more favors of the same kind. With a mine which already promised, to a dead certainty, to develop at least a hundred millions of dollars, what was the happiness of one slip of a girl compared with his need of money and the friendship of an able coadjutor? As far as he was concerned, he would have let Mercedes go, and never cared to set eyes on her again; but Alexander's was one of those tenacious natures that refuse ever to let go when once they have seized hold of a purpose, and the girl's rare beauty and spirit had aroused all his determination to conquer her.

Brant would never have set up a claim to his daughter, as he had done in the previous February, had he not first had the opportunity to observe her by stealth, and formed the purpose to use her beauty as the power which should give him influence with the gold-bug. The story he had then told Mercedes about the murderer—for whose crime he had been obliged to flee the country—having confessed on a dying bed, was the one concession he had made to the wild entreaties of Esther not to poison the child's mind with the tragic story of her youth. It was no trouble to him to invent a falsehood, and he had invented that one to suit his case.

Now, as the two men rung at Miss Silverman's door, they were in no pleasant mood, and for several reasons. Prominent among these was the fact that Alexander had received a telegram from San Francisco demanding his instant return on important business, while Brant knew that he was neglecting all his own interests at a time when they demanded his strict attention. They knew that, whether successful in their errand or not, they must take the evening train for the West. Brant was quite confident of success. He knew that Esther was half-insane with terror at his threats. He believed that she would persuade Mercedes to submit to her fate and become Alexander's wife. Doubtless, he would find his daughter resigned to returning as a bride to San Francisco.

They were ushered into Miss Silverman's superb drawing-room. She was there, ready to receive them, standing in the center of the room, her queenly figure drawn up to its full height, her dark eyes flashing fire, her cheeks showing two red spots which alone betrayed the fierce inward excitement.

Alexander admired her extremely. He thought he had never seen a finer woman. Her dress, her style, her figure suited his taste. Had he seen her before he met Mercedes, he might have chosen her. Conscious that with all his money and power he was not truly a gentleman he had a vivid longing to have "a perfect lady" for his second wife. Her refinement and grace had been Mercedes's most fascinating charm to him. He bowed with some show of deference as his friend introduced him. Brant had not told him the peculiar power he had over Miss Silverman; he was too cunning to betray to Alexander, who had a great deal of pride, that there was any blot on the scutcheon of the family he was to marry into.

Brant looked quickly about the long apartment in search of Mercedes, the frown on his face deepening.

"Where is my daughter—this gentleman's wife? We have come to claim our own: and I trust, Miss Silverman, you ain't going to set up pre-emption claims to her."

"If you mean Mercedes—who denies that she is married to this Mr. Alexander—I have sent her away. She is, by this time, many miles from this city; and I think, Mr. Brant, you will lose time looking for her."

"You dare to tell me to my face that you have sent her away?"

"Yes, Mr. Brant, I dare tell you so. Since her own father gives her no protection I do not hesitate to place myself between her and this person, who has not the slightest imaginable claim to her, and who persists in persecuting a young lady who wishes to have nothing to do with him. Do you regard your conduct as honorable, sir?" turning upon Alexander a pair of sparkling eyes that made him flush.

"The lady is my wife," he answered her, but he turned his eyes away.

"There is a girl named Maraquita who *is* your wife, Mr. Alexander; my niece repudiates the title. Go home to that girl and be a good husband to her. Let my niece alone. This is all that I have to say to either of you gentlemen. I have the pleasure of wishing you both good-morning."

She stepped back a pace or two and stood as if waiting for them to go.

"Look a-here, Esther! You know those grand airs of yours won't go down with me," said Brant, threateningly.

She waved her jeweled hand toward the door.

"Tell me where my daughter is?"

She maintained a proud silence.

"Are you aching to sleep in the Tombs to-night?"

"I know something about the law, Mr. Brant. You will have to produce a requisition from the Governor of Connecticut before your officers can arrest me. That will take time."

Scarcely were these words spoken by Esther than she turned pale with dismay. She had sent Mercedes to Connecticut for safety; and now she had the same as asked Brant to follow her to the scene of the tragedy, where he would be almost certain to learn of her presence at the farm-house, and in that lonely place would have little difficulty in abducting his daughter.

He saw the change in her countenance, and inferred, as if by a flash of intuition, what it meant.

"You are right," he said, with a grim smile.

"Sleep in peace for one or two more nights, Esther. I may kill two birds with one stone by making a visit to a place we both of us too well remember."

He gave her a cunning look and signaled to his friend to come away.

"Rather a short visit, it seems to me," remarked the gold-bug, as he followed Brant out. "Plucky woman, isn't she? Have we come all the way from California just for this? I feel like a fool."

"Patience, patience, Bill! I know now where to look for your wife. We can reach the country farm-house to which she has been sent by midnight. We can have things our own way there! Good!"

"But I must take the train at eight o'clock."

"Can't you spare a day more to make sure of your wife?"

"To make sure of her I might. But it's slippery work, it appears to me."

"Oh, come along! Telegraph your business to Frisco, and we'll take the noon-train and get to that farm-house nearly as soon as she. I've been there before. I know the place. And I have to go on business, myself! I'll settle her hash for her!"

"Whose hash?"

"That woman's who just waved us out of her house. She's a high-flyer, but I'll bring her down."

"What was that about having her arrested?"

"That was all nonsense. I wanted to frighten her—make her think I could put her in the Tombs for concealing my daughter."

Brant had it in his mind to get his daughter off with Alexander and have his revenge on Esther afterward. He was inwardly raving at her, but concealed his anger as much as he could.

"There will be no danger in my appearing in that vicinity after so many years," he thought, as he walked back to the hotel with Alexander.

The two did their telegraphing, took a hasty lunch, and set out in pursuit of the one object of their Eastern visit. They proceeded to the great depot, where they found the train they wanted, and took seats.

They did not notice that a little old woman, very prim in figure, and dark of complexion, wearing green glasses and carrying a large reticule, inquired at the ticket window to what place the two gentlemen bought their tickets, and then purchased one to the same place herself; nor that this old woman took a seat some distance from them, but in the same car; nor that she left the train that afternoon at the little village station where they got off.

Certainly, they never suspected that this quiet old lady had followed them all the way from San Francisco; nor that, under the plain folds of bombazine which covered her breast beat a heart quickened to fever-heat by the burning love and hate of a southern temperament.

Neither did Ben Brant suspect that, among the half-dozen loungers, who always haunt a village railway depot at train-time, was one, a middle-aged man, who eyed him with keenest interest, nor was willing to allow him to pass entirely out of his sight.

CHAPTER XX.

A MIDNIGHT EPISODE.

THAT sunny September day was spent by Mercedes in obeying the injunctions of her aunt, after being aroused as once before in the early dawn and made to understand that she was in peril. Esther had thought of no other expedient for getting her niece away from her father, except to send her to the farm-house in another State where she and her twin-sister had taken refuge eighteen years before. The aunt who had been so kind then to those motherless girls was still living, a mild and lovely old lady, who would welcome Mercedes to that old-fashioned house

in which the girl's sweet eyes had first opened to the light.

Before sending her *there* it became necessary that Miss Silverman should tell her story to her niece, since she would doubtless hear things mentioned there which she would not otherwise understand.

So Esther, in the first faint gray light of the coming dawn went down to her niece's room, awakened her by a gentle kiss, and sitting on the edge of the bed with her darling little dimpled hands clasped tightly in her own, poured out, in low, broken, sobbing words, the pitiful story of her and her twin-sister's youthful folly, and the terrible results.

It was the first time Mercedes had heard her mother's sad history, and she listened with wonder and sorrow.

"You see now, my darling, why I was compelled to let you go when your father claimed you. You see *how* I am in his power. You see what he can and will do to me. It is not that I expect to be hanged for that deed done in the frenzy of brain-fever, that I shrink from this punishment; it is the ordeal of having that folly of my youth dragged to the light which hurts me most. This Delgado, *alias* Brant—your father, my poor child—will not spare me any of the bitterness of degradation. He will have me arrested, dragged to the Tombs, every detail of that sad little drama of my girlhood worked up to feed the eager appetite of the press for scandal. I shall die a thousand deaths."

Mercedes returned the convulsive pressure of her aunt's hand.

"Rather than that, aunt Esther, I will marry Mr. Alexander," she said, with almost fierce firmness.

"No, no. Mercedes, do you think I will allow that? Is not my own story enough to warn me against ill-assorted marriages? No, darling; I will rather endure all that than see your pure soul degraded to mate with that man's. Save yourself, Mercedes. It may be that I shall yet find some plan to escape Brant's revenge. I may beg for a truce."

In reality the tortured woman was thinking that suicide would be the readiest way to end her difficulties; but she must not allow her niece to suspect that such a terrible thought was in her mind.

"Arise, Mercedes, and be dressed. You will take the eight o'clock boat. Rosine shall be your companion."

Miss Silverman found no relief but in incessant activity.

She called up the servants to prepare an early breakfast; with her own hands she packed a small trunk with the plainest of her niece's wearing apparel. In the cool freshness of the autumn morning Mercedes was driven from the fashionable part of the city down to the dock of one of the Sound steamers, accompanied by Rosine, and with Mephistopheles as guard until the moment the plank was hauled in.

Once out on the sapphire waters of the sparkling bay, she felt *safe*; but her aunt's narrative had made her wretched beyond words.

The long hours of the morning dragged by she scarcely knew how; then came the leaving the steamer and taking the train for a two hours' ride; and at four in the afternoon she and her maid got off at the station of a pretty little village, where a carriage was hired to take them out to that farm-house for which they were destined.

A meek-faced old lady, whose dress was plain and faultlessly neat, gave them a pleasant reception. "Niece Esther informed me by telegraph to expect you," was the kindly word of welcome.

The humble but spacious and comfortable house appeared a perfect haven of rest to Mercedes, tossed about as she had been for the last few months. But she could not forget her aunt for a moment—nor that lover from whom she felt afraid she was torn forever. Ceaselessly—oh, how ceaselessly she thought of him!

Doors and windows were open in the large sitting-room when the table was set for tea. A girl of fifteen, adopted by the old lady, and a man who did the farm work, were the only members of the household besides its mistress.

The sun had not set when Mercedes was called to "supper." Rosine, and Hulda, the bound-girl, and Hiram, "the man," all were called to sit at the same board. Broad bands of level sunshine came in at the west door and window and lay across the home-made carpet; a light wind stirred the vines over both, and birds could be heard filling the air with their trills and twitterings.

"If Aunt Esther and Henry were here, I would love to stay forever," thought Mercedes, as she sat at table. "Why does not my aunt come here and enjoy this peaceful life, without caring what the world says about her?"

Aunt Ruth looked at her guest fixedly from time to time, putting on her glasses to aid her failing eyes.

"You must be like your father, Mercy," she said. "You've your mother's eyes an' mouth; but she was fair-complected. It looks kind o' quaint an' queer to see fair hair an' brunette skin. I should have said I wouldn't like it; but now I see you, I can't deny you're as pretty as your mother was—an' that's saying enough."

Tears came into Mercedes's eyes at this mention of her mother.

"She was dead and turned to dust before she come to your age," added the old lady. "A lovely creature! poor young foolish thing! I don't want ever to see such a day again as I did the day you were born, an' she died, an' Esther fell ill o' brain-fever, an' the judge came on here in the midst of it all!"

"Pears to me I've heard tell there was a murder, too, on that very day," added Hiram, from his end of the table.

Mercedes changed color and set down her tea untasted.

"Aunt Ruth," she asked, as soon as she could speak, "will you take me to my mother's grave, when tea is over? I would like to see it."

"I will indeed, my dear. It's right over there in the field, under that elm tree. If you're through we'll start right away, 'fore the dew begins to fall."

In ten minutes more Mercedes was standing by a low, grassy mound, with a rose-bush at the head and foot. A strange feeling overcame her; the setting sun threw a golden glow under the wide elm over the grave and against the simple lettering of a plain white slab:

"SIBYL,
"AGED SEVENTEEN."

Dead at seventeen! her mother! a mere child too hardly punished for a child's folly!

Mercedes thought her own heart would break as she stood there and gazed at the grave. Ah! how brief was life—how full of trouble and change and longing! "Man is born to trouble as the sparks are to fly upward." She thought of her Aunt Esther's blighted life—covered over with roses and jewels, but still blighted; of her own serious perplexities, her sudden parting from Lord Henry, perhaps forever; and bursting into a passion of tears she sunk down, and burying her face in the tall grass of the mound, sobbed and sobbed until Aunt Ruth thought best to steal away to some distance, leaving her alone with her young grief.

When the summer-tempest of her passionate sorrow had somewhat abated Mercedes wiped her eyes and sat sadly pondering many matters.

"How a girl such as my mother must have been, refined, cultivated, could have married a creature like him whom I call father, is the greatest mystery of all, to me," she mused.

She could not realize the great change which eighteen years of rough life—during which he had purposely adopted the speech and manners of those about him, seeking to sink his own identity in that of a rude Western gold-digger—had wrought in the manners and looks of the one now known as Ben Brant. Never anything above the ordinary in intelligence, his splendid dark Spanish beauty and gay air, which had once fascinated Sibyl Silverman, soon went to wreck in the rough weather of a miner's life; his gayety became recklessness; his handsome features hard, wicked and weather-beaten; his speech like that of those around him. The gay gambler of New York, who had fascinated an innocent school-girl, had been merged in the rough miner whose luck had gone up and down, finally to go up, in a splendid financial success.

The grave under the elm was in a field which adjoined the garden, and would have been in full sight of the house had it not been that a row of tall lilac bushes which fenced the garden shut it partially from view. Back of this narrow field, which was now yellow with the stubble of the harvested grain, stretched a wood, beautiful in its deep greenery as yet scarcely touched by the September frosts. It was a lovely spot this, where the dust of the young mother lay. Mercedes remained there so long that Aunt Ruth, full of care as to the disposal of the new milk and the scalding of the bright milk-pans, finally went off to the little dairy-house behind the lilacs, leaving her visitor to return to the house at her leisure.

Mercedes did not realize in the peaceful beauty of the place, as the rosy twilight came down over wood and field, how solitary it was. Suddenly the appearance of an old lady close beside her startled her out of a dream in which Lord Henry's blue eyes looked out of the little floating cloud on which her gaze was fixed. She thought it was Aunt Ruth. When she saw that it was not she arose hurriedly, with a vague feeling of alarm, looking about her to find that her relative had vanished.

"Do not be afraid of me," said the old woman, in a low voice.

Mercedes started, uttering a little cry.

"Hush!" cried the intruder, warningly. "I am followed. At least, there are others in the wood out of which I came, and they look for you. Let us walk on toward the garden. When we get out of sight behind those bushes, I will tell you something."

The quaint, many-gabled old farm-house stood, silent and dark, under the midnight sky. The three tall poplars along by the picket-fence which divided the yard from the road, stood, like military sentinels, stiff and straight. The stars were very bright over the mossy roof and the numerous outbuildings. They made light enough to reveal distinctly the outlines of the place—the chimneys, the gables, the ghostly well-sweep stretching out its long arm as if to threaten.

Two men who came up the road and softly unlatching the gate, entered the yard and stood there reconnoitering, had no difficulty in making out the features of the old homestead.

"I gave the old yellow dog his supper three hours ago," whispered one.

"The hired man sleeps in the loft over the kitchen," returned the other, in the same guarded tones. "He snores like a porpoise. Her bedroom is on the ground floor, in the wing, fortunately for us! There are no shutters, and the sash is raised a few inches to admit the air."

"Have you the shawl ready to throw over her head, so as to muffle her screams? 'Tis best to do the business quietly. We do not desire to use our revolvers, even on Hiram. We are not law-breakers; I am after my wife, who has run away from me. We must keep free of all trouble with others, since we do not care to be delayed by vexatious arrests. Everything is favorable, not a light to be seen."

"Folks sleep sound in these farm-houses, Bill."

"Confound that horse! What is he neighing about?"

"Scents his brethren in the field."

Outside, by the roadside, two or three rods from the gate, stood a light, open buggy, with a single horse, a large, powerful animal. He pawed the ground as if impatient to be off; but his hoofs made but little noise striking into the grassy turf. He gave a single impatient neigh; but the occupants of the farm-house slept on. Not another sound broke the stillness of the night. Innocence and honest toil make deep slumber.

CHAPTER XXI. THE TABLES TURNED.

THERE was no light in the sleeping-room which Aunt Ruth had given Mercedes, except that which came faintly from the starlit sky through the two muslin-curtained windows. The rose-vines outside wove their delicate bars across the casement, forming green blinds which outmatched any made by human hands; but several sharp, silent strokes with a stout knife soon cut these away from one of the two windows, and the figures of two men came in the space, darkly revealed—had there been watchful eyes to see—against the starlight beyond. The sash was raised to admit the sweet, fresh air; so that these midnight intruders had no difficulty in swinging themselves into the room, which they did, and stood there, side by side, with repressed breath, peering about with eager eyes accustomed to the gloom.

Nothing stirred but their own quickened pulses. They made out a large, high, old-fashioned bed, with a white counterpane; toward this they drew, with bated breath and gleaming eyes.

Yes, there, on the pillow, was a fair young head; under the counterpane was outlined a slender figure.

One of the wretches took from his breast-pocket a handkerchief and a bottle of chloroform. The next moment the fumes of the lethargic drug floated through the room, as the handkerchief was saturated with the fluid and held to the nostrils of the sleeper. Five, ten minutes glided away. With the exception of a moan or two, a low gasp of breath, not a sound disturbed the stillness of the room, while the handkerchief was wet again and again and held to the victim's face.

At last the one who administered the chloroform lifted the little hand which lay outside on the bed-covering; it fell back lifelessly, a certain ring on one of the fingers shooting a sparkle of light into the gloom as it did so.

"I think we may venture to move her now," he whispered. "Here's her dress on a chair. I must get her shoes and stockings; and a shawl and bonnet, if I can find them."

Ben Brant tiptoed about the room for a minute, threw an armful of clothing out of the window, and returned to assist his confederate.

Between them, they lifted the unconscious girl out of bed, wrapped about her a thick traveling-rug which they had brought with them, and bore her to the window. She made no more resistance than as if she had been a log of wood. Brant climbed out, received her in his arms and held her until his friend had also cleared the window, when, between them, they carried the poor girl through the yard, out through the gate, to the buggy, where Alexander got in and took the reins, while Brant carefully wrapped the slim figure in more shawls and placed it beside his companion, who threw one arm about it to support it. The remainder of the clothing was bundled into the vehicle, and then the horse was untied from the fence.

"We've got her this time, sure," chuckled Brant.

"I wish you joy of your wedding-trip, Bill! Don't let her take cold. Good-by."

"You'll meet me in Chicago, you say?"

"Yes; I'll be there on Saturday—at the Palmer House."

By this time the girl began to gasp and throw out her arms; Alexander touched the animal lightly with a whip, and off he started down the road, quickly disappearing around a turn.

Ben Brant stood a few moments looking where the buggy had been lost to sight; the large calm stars shone down in cold surprise; the moist air was full of the delicious perfume of fields and wayside flowers; perhaps some feeling of remorse for the part he had played toward his own child touched and stung his hardened heart, for he drew a deep sigh before he muttered:

"Blast it! I don't exactly like kidnapping my own daughter! Wish she could have behaved herself without! She's married to him, straight as a string, however; so that makes it all right. I had to stick to my promise to Alexander. We'll both of us be rich as blazes now. There's nothing can prevent it. She'll learn to like him when she gets used to him. She's a splendid girl and she'll have a splendid home, and, too, she'll find that Ben Brant can be kind to her. I'm just proud to be her father, and if I don't show it, it'll be her fault. But now I must make my way back to the station. There's a freight-train stops to water at two o'clock; I'll board that; a half-eagle will make it all right with the train-hands."

"I reckon, if Bill brings his wife to terms, that I'd better drop Esther like a hot potato, an' hurry on to Chicago. All I wanted was my girl. I don't care to bother Esther—if she lets me alone; and I've no time to fool away, that's certain. I'd have to stop and be witness if I had her arrested. Of course that was all gammon to scare her into doing what I wanted! In fact, I wouldn't venture to accuse her! They'd say I was the man who was the prisoner, once, for that murder: that I was the only one who saw the deed done; that I did it myself!"

"Let her go. She's got a good scare. I'll meet Bill at the Palmer House, and we'll go on to California together. Mercy will be glad to behave herself

before that. She'll be meek as a lamb, once she gives up that she's his wife!"

Ben had begun his walk to the station during his soliloquy. He meant to take the freight-train and be far from the village before the inmates of the farm-house awoke to the discovery that something had happened while they were asleep.

"Man proposes, but God disposes." There were other persons awake and out on mysterious errands that starlit night. If there was a plot working against the innocent, there was also a trap being set to catch a fox.

Ben Brant had not traversed half the way back to the station when he was surprised to see three men coming along the road. He was surprised because he had a guilty conscience, and the hour was an unusual one for people to be abroad. As he would have passed them, they stopped; a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder.

"What's this?" cried Ben, with an oath, pulling a revolver from his breast.

"None o' that," cried the one whose hand clutched him. "I arrest you, Antonio Delgado, as an escaped prisoner, accused of the murder of Thomas Cleveland in the year 1857. Keep quiet a bit, and I'll read you the warrant."

A fierce oath came hissing from between Brant's teeth.

So, by visiting this place again, he had been recognized! Here was a pretty scrape! His immense interests in Nevada were suffering from his absence. He was in a great hurry to return, and here he was—a prisoner, with the prospect of months spent in a country jail!

His thoughts, for the present, went no further than that. Imprisonment was bad enough, under the circumstances. He did not ask himself if there was any more serious danger.

"I'll have to blow on Esther," was what he thought.

He would make an effort to escape. He went on quietly until they neared the railroad crossing just out of the village. There, by a sudden spring, he attempted to throw off his captors; but they were on their guard, and his *ruse* did not succeed.

"Come, no more of that," and the sheriff clapped a pair of handcuffs about his wrists.

"You're mistaken in your man, and I'll make you pay for this," threatened the prisoner. "My name is Benjamin Brant. I am just from Frisco—came on East to tend to some mining matters. I'm able to buy out the hull of this picayune State, an' he'll be sorry who makes the mistake o' coppin' me up!"

"We will see about that when your examination takes place. If you are the wrong man there will be no great harm done; and if you're the right man we shall want to keep you."

"Who says I'm—I'm that other chap?"

"One of our citizens thought he recognized you as soon as you stepped off the cars. He kept an eye on you, and when he found you hanging about the very farm-house, just as you did in '57, he was sure of his man. What have you been doing out here at this time of night anyhow?"

Brant had no reply to this leading question. He silently hoped that Alexander would be out of Connecticut before morning with the fair companion of his ride.

It had been the idea of the two conspirators that if Mercedes could be kept in Alexander's company through that long, lonely ride, her womanly pride and care for her good name would make her willing to consent to have the marriage ceremony repeated, since she denied being a party to the first rites.

It was a cruel mode of forcing her into a marriage she detested; but Ben Brant had no mercy where his own interests were at stake.

His punishment was coming upon him rather quickly. Things were not turning out, as far as he was concerned, at all as he had anticipated.

To be in the hands of a sheriff, to have his weapons taken from him, to be locked in an uncomfortable cell in the same jail from which he had once escaped, were scenes not set down in the programme he had arranged.

No sleep visited his busy brain the brief remainder of the night. He spent the hours in alternately cursing his luck and deciding on the plan of his defense.

Two courses were open to him. To deny that he was Antonio Delgado, in the hope that it could not be proved, was one course. To confess that he was that personage and tell the true story of the murder, was the other.

He could not have hesitated on Esther's account to pursue the latter plan; but he had no idea his story would be believed unless Esther chose to confirm it. It would also involve him in more delay; while, if he could successfully deny his identity with Delgado, he might be discharged at once, with only a few hours' detention.

He resolved to deny that he was Antonio Delgado.

CHAPTER XXII.

"WHAT SHALL HE LIKEN HIS LOVE UNTO?"

WHEN Lord Henry went back to the hotel, after Miss Silverman's confession, there was quite a scene between father and son.

Henry confessed that the lady's reasons for breaking off the match were insuperable—that she was bound in honor to have done so—that his father would soon be glad to have escaped the marriage.

But when the earl, angry, bitterly disappointed, miserable, ordered his son to return to England with him by the steamer which sailed the next day, Lord Henry declared that he was not ready to quit New York. His father accused him of remaining to consummate a marriage with a lady unworthy of him, the relative of her who acknowledged herself unfit to be the earl's wife; upbraided him with a want of proper self-respect, and a willingness to trail in the dust the proud name of a peer of the realm.

Henry denied that he had any thoughts or plans of marriage; said that he did not even know where Mercedes was; but acknowledged that he was very unhappy, and begged his parent to allow him time to conquer his passion.

"It is no way to conquer it to remain where you will be constantly reminded of it, Henry."

"Oh, father, I am so dispirited and hopeless, I do not feel like showing my face in England."

"How do you suppose I feel, my boy? It is I who have been made a fool of!" and the haughty "peer of the realm" actually groaned.

"I am sorry for you, father!—I wish you were half as sorry for me! If you were you would not object to my taking my time to come home—you would give me a chance to recover myself. I wish I were dead!" added the young fellow, dropping into a chair, with drooping head and eyes fixed on the floor.

"You will get over that."

"Never! the hurt is too deep—here," placing his hand over his heart.

"Oh, yes you will. Your disappointment is not to be mentioned in the same breath with mine! You are young—the world is all before you where to choose—but I am past the age of romance. I shall not make an idiot of myself twice. I shall go back forlorn, my life all gray and tame. I had built up quite a castle in Spain, my boy. You will not believe how lovely and pleasant it was—all gold and white in a garden of roses. Do you know that Esther means the same as Stella—a star? She was my star! A magnificent woman! And now she has cruelly disappointed me. Your griefs are light compared with mine, boy; you will outlive them."

"I do not want to live," Henry murmured again, two great, hot tears dropping from his blue eyes. "I have already lived long enough to know that life's very best is a poor recompense for the sorrows it entails."

"Nonsense!"

"Father, you saw her, three evenings ago. You know what she is. Do you think I shall care for anything in this world when I have sailed away from the country that holds her?"

"She was a rare creature, I confess. But, you will find others."

"I loved her the first instant I saw her! Miss Silverman had no more than spoken our names to one another than my very soul was hers. Why was that, if it was not that we were made for one another? I knew she was my fate from that hour. She liked me, too. There was no pretense of indifference between us. It was impossible for us to hide our hearts."

"I wish you would tell me what her aunt has done to make a muddle of all our destinies! I cannot comprehend."

"I cannot tell you, father. Of only one thing can I assure you—that, as a woman, she is pure and modest, without stain. But her life is so linked in with the misdeeds of others, so shadowed by one dreadful act of her own, done when she was not herself, that—she feels that she would wrong you to marry you."

"Why did she not say so at first?"

"She loved you; and she hoped the shadow had passed. Late events have alarmed her—ah, great heaven! she is right! I do not wish you to marry her! I am wretched—hopeless—I know that what I desire can never be! But, father, I am weak, foolish, fond! I cannot tear myself away at once; it will be like tearing the bleeding heart out of my bosom."

He looked up, pale, haggard, his young face written over with the lines of his suffering. His father could not resist such pleading.

"Remain, if you wish. All I ask is, that you will be prudent."

The earl no more understood why it was that his son was so hopeless of marriage with the young lady than he understood why Esther had so suddenly broken her engagement with him only two days before their wedding was to have taken place. He surmised that some crime or disgrace hung over the family; further than that he knew nothing.

"I love her! I love her!" burst again from Henry's lips, with a passion of grief. "Oh, father, you cannot tell how this is hurting me! But I am selfish; you, too, dear father, are suffering."

In his secret heart the earl believed that he was the one who most needed sympathy. Henry was young and would outlive his first love, but his liking for that stately and brilliant woman was a deeper feeling, and one not likely to bloom again—a rare, sweet flower, which had appeared as by miracle amid the mellow fruitage of the early autumn of his life.

"I think I shall keep my promise to attend the wedding reception at Mrs. Ogden Livingstone's," he said, presently. "It is to-night! I might send regrets—but, I am going! To-morrow I shall be on the ocean, sailing away from all my happy hopes, but to-night is my own."

"You will not see Miss Silverman there, father," answered Henry, with a vivid remembrance of that white face and those despairing eyes from whose presence he had gone out that morning.

"I do not expect it. Why should I try to see her again?"

Yet, if the earl had not, almost unknown to himself, believed that he might see Esther there, he would hardly have troubled himself to meet a crowd of strangers that night.

Mrs. Livingstone was a part of the cream of the cream of New York "best society." It pleased her to know that she was to have an earl and his son at her fair daughter's wedding reception. Bitter would have been her disappointment had they recalled their acceptance; bright grew her eyes when, about ten o'clock that evening, in the light of the brilliant crush, her lions made their welcome appearance. Exceeding great was her triumph when the cour-

teous earl complimented the lovely arrangement of the costly and beautiful flowers which lavishly adorned and embowered the suits of superb rooms. She nearly yielded to the temptation of telling him how many thousands of dollars the fragile decoration cost; but she was a well-bred woman and restrained herself. All the married belles made efforts to gain the attention of the earl; all the marriageable ones, of his son.

The great sadness which weighed down the earl's spirits was felt by those about him to be reserve and pride; they did not guess how eagerly he watched and waited for one whom he soon despaired of seeing; for not a hint of Miss Silverman's engagement had gotten out; a caution on her part for which now she was thankful enough.

From room to room he wandered slowly, as his fair admirers allowed—even to the conservatory, and the hall up-stairs where dancing was going on.

"It was madness of me to think she would come out! Of course she is in deep trouble of some kind," he murmured, despairingly.

But, Esther was only a woman—a passionate, loving woman, whose heart, long kept down in silence and darkness by that early tragedy, had arisen in its might at last to claim its own. She would not link this proud man whom she loved to her disgrace. But she could not let him go without one more look!

She had gone to bed at dusk with a raging headache, had fallen into a troubled slumber and awakened from it with the sudden resolve to see the earl once more.

She believed that he would keep his engagement with Mrs. Livingstone. Calling Rosine, she bade her order the carriage and then dress her as quickly as possible. She put on the dress in which she was to have been married—a magnificent satin, lustrous, ivory-white; and with it her finest pearls and diamonds. A pink rose in her bosom and one in her dusky hair took away from the bridal look of her white toilet.

As she gathered up her fan and handkerchief she took a good look at herself in the glass. She saw there a peerless, beautiful woman. The heavy shadows under her dark eyes made them appear more large and lustrous; the passionate throbbing of her heart brought a faint glow into a rich pale face of vivid loveliness.

"Do I look like a murderess?" she asked, turning to Rosine.

"Madame?" answered the startled girl.

"It was a jest," said her mistress, with a bitter, reckless laugh. "Now, Rosine, I must be off, or the one I desire to meet at Mrs. Livingstone's will have left there. Wait up for me; I shall not be long away."

The other ladies who hovered about the hostess took on a faded look when Esther Silverman presented herself. Her always splendid beauty was, to-night, more than merely splendid. The despair, love, anguish at her heart, shone through, not as suffering, but as rich and superb expression and coloring. The rose on her cheek was warm, the fire in her eye dazzling.

"Very poor taste of her to wear white satin, richer than mine!" complained the bride.

Esther had no thought of outshining the new-made wife. She wore her best, but it was that Gascoigne might see her in it!

As soon as possible, she ensconced herself in a deep window-seat, and, from her nook, beheld the earl moving restlessly from room to room, evidently in search of her.

Her eyes fed on his grave, sad face; her spirit rose in protest against her own unhappy fate. Why should she not be his wife?

The gay, softly-beating, softly-repeating strains of the delicious dance measures almost made her scream aloud, so wrought to almost frenzy did she grow, gazing at the one she loved, knowing that happiness had slipped out of her grasp. Over and over to herself she murmured some verses that floated to the surface of her memory, though she knew not how they came there:

"Still that music underneath
Works to madness in my brain.
Even the roses seem to breathe
Poisoned perfumes, full of pain."

"Let me think!—my head is aching,
I have little strength to think;
And I know my heart is breaking;
Yet, oh love, I will not shrink."

"In his look is such sweet sadness,
As he bends that look on me.
I am helpless—call it madness,
Call it guilt—but it must be!"

The sharp darts of pain that shot through Esther's head became more frequent. Once or twice it occurred to her that she was feeling much as she felt that horrible day, so many weary years ago, when her twin-sister died, and—and—so many other things happened.

Presently the earl, wandering listlessly about, doing his best to appear interested and pleased, for courtesy's sake, felt a strange, magnetic attraction drawing him to a certain part of the back drawing-room; he made his way through ranks of silks and jewels and saw the star-eyes of Esther fixed full upon him.

"Ah, you are here?" he said, tenderly, as soon as he could reach her side. "I have been looking for you so long that I was about to leave in despair."

"Gascoigne!" her low, thrilling voice breathed music into his name.

How beautiful, how faultless she looked! What could there be to set the sea between her and him? How her eyes shone!—dark as night, bright as diamonds.

"Esther," he whispered, bending over her. "you

are a beautiful mystery to me! I do not understand why you are here to-night if you and I are to be separated. Take back that cruel message you sent me. Say to me, now, that it was a jest."

"It was no jest, Gascoigne. Something dark and dreadful lies between us. Let me whisper to you what that hideous thing is. Murder—it is murder! My hand is red with blood. Look at it!" she tore off her glove and held up her soft, white, shapely hand, while her glittering eyes searched his face with a curious, intent look.

"You are ill and over-excited, Esther," spoke the earl, beginning to feel uneasy, half-shrinking from her fixed gaze.

"I am ill, Gascoigne. My head aches terribly. I think I shall go mad with the pain."

"Shall I call your carriage? Will you go to the dressing-room?"

"Yes, if you please, Gascoigne!"

She arose to take his offered arm. Perhaps the sudden motion increased the pain in her head, for she gave a low, sharp scream, and would have fallen had he not caught her.

"She has fainted," he cried, to those about him.

Alas! it was worse than an ordinary fainting-fit. It was just such a deep unconsciousness as that from which she once awoke in the ravings of brain fever.

Finding that she could not be revived, her physician was sent for, and she was placed in her carriage and taken home under his care. Before morning the congestion had partially passed away; but Esther was in a high fever and delirious.

Faithful Rosine put away her lady's jewels and satin robe, and went to her bedside to watch patiently over her.

"Miss Mercedes ought to be here," she said, to Mephistopheles, "but I do not know where she is, or how to find her."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN APRIL FOOL IN SEPTEMBER.

THE earl disposed of his steamer tickets and remained in New York. He could not leave the city while the woman he came to marry remained dangerously ill. There was a great weight on his mind, besides that of anxiety for Esther's health. Her fatal words about "murder" lay heavily on his thoughts. He sometimes persuaded himself that she was out of her mind when she held up her hand to him, saying that it was red with blood—that delirium was even then lurking in her brain, and her speech was the result of some insane fancy. Yet there had been an air of reality, of terrible earnestness about what she said, which he could not forget. It made the impression of truth on him.

Finally he spoke to his son about it, who, surprised and distressed, acknowledged that Miss Silverman had told him the reason she would not marry—that she was a murderess, and that her crime was in danger of becoming public.

At this the earl gave up any lingering hopes he might have had of marrying Esther, even should she recover. He was sufficiently uncomfortable, and as a relief to his mind, took a trip to Niagara and into Canada, visiting Quebec and Montreal, then The Thousand Isles and back into the U. S. by way of Lake George. Lord Henry remained behind, telegraphing the state of Miss Silverman's health twice a day to the wanderer.

All these days he heard nothing of Mercedes. For all he knew, that unprincipled Californian might have trapped her into becoming his wife before this, and be back in San Francisco triumphant.

Henry's blue eyes grew large and melancholy; his face lost something of its ruddy tone. Jealousy was harder to endure than even hopeless love.

Miss Silverman had been ill two weeks and her fever was not yet broken. Her strength failed fast; the physician looked grave; Henry came away from her house late one chilly September afternoon feeling very sad. He did not believe the lady was going to live. He thought it very strange that no letters in Mercedes's handwriting had arrived for her aunt, as Mephistopheles assured him there had not. He strolled back to his hotel, heartsick and weary. As he passed through the rotunda a well-dressed, pretty, graceful girl stepped up to him.

"Maraquita?" he exclaimed, only half-recognizing her.

"Yes, Maraquita!"

His heart gave a great leap. She must bring him tidings of Mercedes!

"I want to talk with you," she said, not hesitatingly but with a decision which foretold her mission.

"We will find a quiet corner in one of the parlors. I am so glad to see you, Maraquita. Where did you come from, my dear?"—hurrying her up the stairs and into one of the parlors, where they had a window to themselves. "You look thin and pale."

"Ah, so do you, my lord. Heaven knows we both have reason enough! I followed Bill and Ben Brant when they came on. I was in the same train with them, disguised as an old person. I knew that I was Bill's wife, and I thought I had a right to follow him. I shall kill Bill Alexander some day, if he is my husband. I know I shall! I have felt it coming this long time! He does not see it, but I do! If he does not let Miss Mercedes alone, I shall kill him. *Quien sabe?*—no door will keep out love or death," is mother's proverb. He is doomed."

"Do not talk in that way, my child. To cherish such thoughts is to make them come true. Where is Miss Mercedes? Do you know? Have you been with her? Does she know that her Aunt Esther is dangerously ill? I do not know where Miss Mercedes is or I should have told her the bad news"—he stumbled along with his questions without waiting for an answer; his heart stood still with suspense, afraid he should hear that Mercedes had fallen in the power of

her father and his comrade—afraid to learn the truth, yet eager to know the worst.

Maraquita opened her lips to answer him, but, instead, burst out laughing and crying so hysterically that Lord Henry did not know what to do or think. Fortunately there was no one in that part of the large room but themselves. A man greatly dislikes to see a woman in hysterics; the young gentleman felt very awkward, and not a little angered.

We should explain for poor Maraquita, what it was that betrayed her into that nervous attack. To do it we must return to that night when Brant and his confederate had tracked Mercedes to her country retreat and planned her abduction.

The Spanish girl, in the old woman disguise she had adopted, reached her young lady, as we know, and revealed to her the presence of her enemies, with the probability that they had come there with the purpose of securing Mercedes and giving her once more to Alexander.

Mercedes took her friend into the house, secured some supper for her, and conducted her to her own room—the sitting-room on the ground floor which we have previously mentioned. There the two—urged, one by jealousy, the other by terror—put their heads together, to counterplot against the plotters. It seemed reasonable to infer that an attempt would be made to carry off Mercedes.

It was agreed that Maraquita should again personate her young lady. Half-wild to think that Alexander should continue his pursuit of Mercedes the Spanish girl entered into the plan with avidity. To thwart, to madden, to ridicule her lord and master would be sweet revenge. She knew that he would be desperately angry, but she was brave and determined to incur the peril.

Suspecting that a reconnoiter of the premises was going on, the two girls sat in the twilight, conversing in whispers. When all was agreed to, Maraquita concealed herself by so sitting in an alcove of the room that persons at the windows could not know of her presence.

Mercedes then made the apartment light with a couple of lamps, purposely leaving the curtains undrawn so that no doubt might remain of her occupancy of the room. Aunt Ruth came in and chatted awhile, then went early to bed.

The young lady was conscious of a curious thrilling of the nerves as the little family retired, all noises about the house ceased, and all windows but her own darkened.

She sat, pretending to read, until quite late. She could see Maraquita's large, fiery eyes, sleepless and glowing, but she dared not converse with her.

About eleven, she pulled the muslin curtains together, over one of the windows and extinguished one of the lights, and then Maraquita prepared herself and laid down in her young lady's bed.

Neither of the girls thought of the danger of chloroform.

Mercedes, nervous and terribly excited, seated herself on a chair in a large closet off the room. Nearly two hours dragged by—long, endless hours—her heart beating at the slightest sound.

The state of the poor Spaniard's mind was not to be envied either. But she carried out her part to perfection. Even when the penetrating fumes of the drug entered her nostrils she made no resistance.

She knew that it would not kill her, and she did not care.

When she came to her senses, the cool, moist, fragrant air of night kissed her forehead as the carriage, in which she had been placed, flew forward over the smooth highway. She felt stupid and ill at first, but the pure air revived her. She tried to collect herself and be prepared for the outbreak which would follow the *dénouement* of the adventure.

Alexander's arm was about her waist, supporting her; her head was on his shoulder. Ah! she loved this man! Once he had been tender and flattering—breathed sweet words—looked lovingly, all for her! How full of supreme bliss would have been the full fountains of her heart if he had been her lover still!

She sighed at the thought of it, and he asked her, gently, in that soft, persuasive voice which he could adopt at pleasure, if she were tired.

She affected to lapse into sleep again; but her heart bounded so with conflicting passions of love and hate that he must have felt it; for he turned and whispered:

"Are you frightened, my sweet wife?"

"Yes," she whispered in return.

"There is no cause for it. I shall be very considerate of your feelings. All I ask is that you go quietly with me on board the train for the West, which I shall take early in the morning. If you are gentle and obedient I will spare you all I can. You know what has happened? Where you are? You are out alone with me in the night; we shall be together on this journey all night; as man and wife it will be all right; but you see it is useless for you to resist your destiny! This ride binds us together for life. You are compromised, unless you consent to assume the title of wife, which belongs to you. You are mine, at last, my beauty! I told you I should never give you up. Yield gracefully to your destiny, and we will live happy together, after all—for I love you, my proud wife—love you madly!"

His warm words affected the poor little fool by his side almost as deeply as if they had knowingly been addressed to her. A great sob burst from her panting bosom, and throwing her arms about his neck and clinging wildly to him, she gasped:

"Bill! Bill! It is your own little Keety you are talking to! Oh, I am your wife, Bill! See, by this ring on my hand. You always promised to marry me and love me all my days. Will you do it? Will you keep me with you, Bill? Ah! be good to poor Keety! I am so fond of you!—I love you so—!"

Alexander, in his utter astonishment, had reined

up his horse and turned upon this girl whom, up to that moment, he had believed buried in the ruins of the earthquake which had overtaken them in Oakland.

His wrath was too great for words. She could see, by the tranquil starlight, that he turned white.

"How came you here?" he hissed, as soon as he could speak.

"How do I know? I was in my bed, and now I am here. *Dios sabe!* Bill, Bill!" she screamed. But his hand came down on her mouth with a blow of steel, that cut her sweet red lips, and made blood gush out of her mouth.

"Get out of this buggy, you she-devil!"

"It is so dark—and late. Bill, please don't turn me out here. I am frightened."

"GET OUT OF THIS BUGGY!"

She knew that low, concentrated hiss well enough; she had heard it twice or thrice before. She jumped out into the road and stood there dumb, half-blind, her mouth aching, her heart aching a thousand times worse, while he wheeled about and drove off at the utmost speed of the horse, whom he lashed at every step.

Mercedes, lying wide awake on the bed from which the Spanish girl had been taken, heard, at about three that morning, while it was still without sign of dawn in the sky, a loud, imperative knock at the front door of the farm-house.

She sprang out of bed, trembling, her heart in her mouth.

The knock was repeated with a vehemence which aroused the other inmates of the house. She heard Aunt Ruth raise the window of her sleeping chamber and say something.

Instantly came back the ringing demand:

"I want my wife. She is in this house. Open the door or I will break it down."

Aunt Ruth made some answer, but Mercedes did not pause an instant to learn what it was. She had not undressed at all that night, having merely flung herself down on the outside of the bed for a little rest to her weary body; now she caught up her hat and shawl, leaped out of the open window and ran into the garden. Keeping in the shadow of the lilacs she stole along, crept over the stile into the field, and crossing that, plunged boldly into the sheltering wood.

The poor child was a ridiculous coward, by nature; such a place usually would be peopled, to her imagination, with untold horrors; but now she thought more of escape from her persecutor than of any danger, however terrible.

Her thin shoes were wet with the night dew; she shivered with fright and cold; but she kept on, deeper and deeper into the wood, until, exhausted she sunk down, leaned her head against the trunk of a tree, and waited for morning.

Mercedes did not know until then that a night could be so long. It appeared to her that some accident must have happened in the universe somewhere which held back the sun from rising!—time could not pass so slowly!—yet it had passed just as usual. The dawn began to creep through the wood; it slowly brightened; birds twittered overhead; a squirrel came out, close by, and ran over her feet, and Mercedes arose to pursue her way, not knowing what to do or where to go, filled only with one idea—to escape from Alexander.

She had gone but a few paces when she came upon a well-worn path, which she followed, until, nestled right there in the thick wood, with only a small garden-patch cleared away from behind it, she saw a little cottage from whose chimney the smoke was just beginning to curl. Faint with fatigue and shivering with cold she was hesitating whether or not to appeal to its inmates, when she saw a bright looking lad of sixteen or seventeen cutting wood at the back of the house, and she walked around there and spoke to him.

If he had seen an angel the boy could not have been more surprised than at the vision of this pale, lovely lady, her silk dress wet with dew, her long gold hair falling thickly almost to her knees, her dark, sweet eyes looking at him imploringly. He was fairly frightened, letting his ax drop and staring at her open-mouthed, so that, distressed as she was, Mercedes was forced to smile.

"Who lives here?" she asked.

"Mother an' I."

"No one else?"

"Nobuddy but us two."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Mother knits socks an' puts up yarbs. I do odd jobs as I can get 'em. But it's mighty hard sledding, I tell you. Miss Silverman she 'lows us to live here, rent-free; so we get along, some-way."

"Do you suppose your mother would take a boarder for a few days?"

"A boarder! Je-hos-aphat! Why, we hain't got nuthin' to eat fit fur a lady like you. You couldn't stand us a single day! What on airth d'ye want to come to a place like this fur, anyway? It's queer!"

Mercedes took her purse from her pocket, opened it, displayed to his sparkling, greedy gaze a whole handful of bright California gold-pieces, one of which she put in his hand.

"You need not be afraid of me. I have done nothing wrong. I am only hiding from a man I don't like, who wants to marry me. Can I trust you and your mother? If you will keep me, and promise not to let a living soul know that I am here you shall have half the gold in this purse when I go away. But if I am found out through your fault, you shall not have a dollar."

"Come in an' talk to mother, miss. I bet you can strike up a bargain."

Mercedes, following him into the one-roomed house, saw a neat, pleasant old woman putting the coffee on to boil. The place was orderly, the dishes seemed clean and the face of the woman honest.

She tried to speak, but her feelings suddenly overcame her, and she burst into a passion of sobs.

"There! there!" said the old lady, kindly, "you're tired and clean beat out, my dear. Set down an' let me take off your bunnit an' pour ye a cup of coffee, an' then ye can tell all about it."

And in this humble abode the proud beauty found comfort, protection and sympathy for the next few days. The boy became her admiring champion, swearing he would brain with his ax the man who dared to lay a hand on her; while the gold-bug of Frisco, furious and determined, searched everywhere but in that one out-of-the-way place where she might have been found.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHICH SHALL BE THE VICTIM?

BEN BRANT cursed his folly in coming East in pursuit of his willful daughter, a thousand times thrice over in the following days after his arrest. The law seemed to take hold of him with all the more vigor that the crime for which he was prosecuted had been committed so long ago. Detectives were put on the track, and by the time the court set, which was in ten days from that of his arrest, there was sufficient evidence to identify him as the Antonio Delgado of the past, who had escaped from prison while under the charge of the murder of Thomas Cleveland in '57.

Young Cleveland's father was dead; but he had a brother who, as soon as he heard of the re-arrest, came on to the village and gave up time and money in the effort to convict the supposed murderer of Thomas. Things looked very black for Brant.

Alexander showed much generosity in sticking by his friend. He remained in the vicinity, ignoring the fact that he was wanted in San Francisco. He employed the best counsel for his partner. At the same time he had another object in lingering. His passion for Mercedes had taken a vindictive shape since the night when he had been fooled into running off with Maraquita. He resolved to humble Mercedes to the dust. He had men paid by the day to haunt the railway trains and watch the country; he had half a dozen detectives on the alert in New York, spurred to their best efforts by the promises of extraordinary rewards if they succeeded in placing his wife—for as such he always represented her, showing the certificate and the priest's added written confirmation in proof of it—in his hands.

Hidden in her humble retreat, Mercedes would indeed have feared to make the attempt to return to her aunt if she had known the nets spread everywhere for her girlish feet.

The days were long and lonely which she spent in the cottage. Not that she cared for small physical discomforts; her hostess did not allow her to freeze or starve; but Mercedes knew that her enemy still lurked in the vicinity, and heard, too, the story of her father's arrest and approaching trial. The lad acted as her spy. He had a world of Yankee shrewdness, managing to inform himself of everything that occurred, or was gossiped about at the hotel or station, while he passed for an idle boy who fooled away too much time instead of being at work. This information he brought to the young lady.

The trial began.

The lad hung about the court-house on the pretense of peddling apples and nuts. Every evening he brought to the half-distracted girl the particulars of the day's proceedings. That was a period of anguish to Mercedes. She knew the truth about that murder. And aunt Esther had confessed the whole sad story to her. Every day she expected that her father would, in self-defense, declare the truth. She knew the shame and agony which awaited her aunt.

Yet truth was truth.

Was it right for her, Mercedes, who knew the truth, to allow an innocent man to receive the death-sentence, when she could save him?—and that man, HER FATHER!

She loved her aunt a hundred times more than she did her parent. She would have given her young life to save Esther from trouble, exposure and danger. Her father was selfish, and cruel, and bad. Her aunt was noble, and loving, and unfortunate.

Oh, what should she do? What ought she to do?

Hour by hour it was forced upon her unwilling conscience that it was her duty to come forward and tell what she knew.

Hour by hour the pressure became more irresistible.

Yet she held back. Ah! cruel, to make her hand the one to wound her dear aunt—to drag her proud name in the dirt!

One night, after the trial had run on several days, the boy came home, eager to relate the new phase the affair had taken on. The defense had made an avowal, which if it could be proved, would alter the aspect of the case entirely. Delgado, alias Brant, had given a minute and particular account of the murder, making a free breast of everything, and accusing a lady of having committed the crime. He had given the lady's name, with full particulars of the preceding drama which had led to the final tragedy. He told of his own secret marriage to one of the twin-daughters of Judge Silverman, and of the murdered youth's marriage to the other one. He declared that Cleveland's wife had repented her rash choice and had never lived with her husband; but that his wife—Delgado's—had lived with him and had come to her aunt Ruth's, in this vicinity, with the object of keeping the birth of her child a secret from her father. He went on to say that the two young husbands came to the village to see their wives—that they were walking amicably together toward the farm-house, when they encountered Esther, Cleveland's wife, who came at them like a mad creature, told them her sister was

dead, and plunged a pair of scissors which she held into her husband's breast.

He avowed that it was compassion for the murderer—who, he heard, had gone into a brain-fever, and who, he had no doubt, was really and wildly insane when she did the deed—which had kept him from denouncing her on his first arrest. He had resolved to escape, if possible, and thus save his life, without endangering hers. He did it, and had remained an exile all these years. Finally he had come East, moved by a natural desire to make the acquaintance of his own daughter, and this was the result!

This strange story of course produced a profound sensation. The wires had clicked it all over the country before night.

As the prisoner's lawyers said, it would only be necessary to prove the facts stated by their client, to prove, inferentially, his innocence of the murder.

"Alas, my poor Aunt Esther!" Mercedes moaned, as she listened to the boy's eager recital. "My poor, poor Aunt Esther! Oh, that I were by your side, to prove my love for you! To think that I am absent from you at such a time! Joe, is there a train south this evening?"

"There's a nine o'clock train, miss."

"Mrs. Brown, may Joe go with me to New York? I will take good care of him; and he will take good care of me."

The boy's eyes sparkled with excitement at the prospect.

"I'm bound to go, mother," he said, emphatically.

Mercedes borrowed her hostess's old-fashioned poke-bonnet and long camlet waterproof; to this she added a cane, and the two set out, at eight that evening, on their journey. No one doubted that Joe was conducting his old mother to the cars who saw his companion hobbling by his side—not even the hulking fellow who took Alexander's pay for watching the depot. Joe bought tickets to the nearest town; when they arrived there he dashed out the cars and took tickets for New York, thus preventing his destination from becoming known in his own village.

It is probable that Mercedes would have risked every thing and appeared in court the following day, to tell the truth about the murder, had not her father anticipated her by making his own revelations. This freed her from that agonizing stress of conscience. Now she was free to keep her knowledge to herself. It remained with the prosecuting attorney, not with her, to hunt up evidence. She could keep her lips sealed.

It was hardly midnight when the two arrived at the Grand Central Depot. Joe assisted a feeble and lame old lady out of the cars. A detective, near by, smiled at the green boy, whose mouth hung open from wonder at the sights on every hand.

Joe asked a policeman about the cars—what cars to take to go up the Sixth avenue, and how to find them. The information was given, while his companion leaned on her cane, her face hidden in her poke-bonnet, saying not a word. Then Joe led her out, and found the car; they rode down-town; but it was she who whispered to him when it was time to stop the car; they got out on Sixth avenue, walked over to Fifth and were soon in front of the house which one of them knew so well.

What was this?

Mercedes nearly sunk to the pavement as she saw, by the gas-lamps, that the street opposite the house was covered with straw and the door-bell muffled.

"Aunt Esther!" was her silent cry, as she slowly climbed the steps, all her strength failing from her.

She tapped lightly on the door, which was instantly opened by Mephistopheles, who was looking for the physician, who had promised to come again at midnight. He stared stupidly at the queer figures before him, for Joe had followed at the heels of the young lady.

"Meph," whispered the girl, dashing aside her poke-bonnet, "it is I. Tell me, what has happened—who is ill?"

The faithful servant softly closed the door, taking out his handkerchief and wiping his eyes before he answered:

"Tis Miss Silverman, my dear young miss. It isn't expected she will live the night out—brain-fever this three weeks!"

Mercedes sunk down in a chair, white and shaking.

"May I go to her, Meph?"

"Not now. Not unless the doctor says yes. He will be here soon."

"This is too bitter! I shall die, too! I shall die, too!"

Meph went softly into the dining-room and set out some wine and other refreshments. Coming back, he took her by the hand, as if she had been a little child, and led her to the table, where he filled a glass with sherry and gave her. She was forced to drink it to keep off the deadly faintness that assailed her.

"Who is the boy?"

"One of my friends. Meph, give him some supper and a bed. He came here with me to take care of me. These are strange times, Meph—strange times."

"So they are, miss. I never thought to live to see them. Miss Mercedes, what do they mean by that stuff in the papers this evening? For God's sake, missa, what does it mean?"

"Is it in the papers already?—that—about—Aunt Esther?"

"Yes. I read it myself. I guess the doctor read it, too. It's all an awful pack o' lies, ain't it, Miss Mercedes?—an awful, shameful, disgraceful pack o' lies!"

"It is every word true."

His hands fell by his sides; his yellow face turned gray; his teeth chattered together.

"Miss Esther married all these years, and murdered her husband?" he stammered, when he could speak.

"She was only a child when she was led into that secret marriage. She never lived with her husband, and she was crazy with brain-fever when she struck him. She did not know what she was doing. Oh, my poor, unhappy aunt!"

"Miss Silverman! The proud lady too good for anybody—Miss Esther Silverman!" murmured the old servant. "Well, miss, it isn't for me to say it, but it would be good-luck for my mistress to die to-night. I hope she may never see the sun rise again."

"How dare you say that!" cried Mercedes. "How dare you! Down on your knees, Meph, and pray that my darling may live—she, who is so good, so noble, so perfect, but so unfortunate! Pray for her—pray for her, for my sake! for I cannot live without her!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GOLDEN DOOR OF ESCAPE.

MANY others there were in New York who were astonished at the romantic tragedy of which they read the telegraphed account, in their evening papers, over their luxurious dinners. Most of these knew that the unfortunate lady, who was the heroine of this strange story, now lay at the point of death, and they said, as people will, that it were better she should die than recover.

But the issues of life and death are in the hands of the Almighty, and it is not for poor humanity to decide which shall be chosen.

Esther Silverman had so maintained her proud position in society, with never one tag of gossip or scandal clinging to her garments, that it filled her acquaintances with incredulity when they first perused the story. Perhaps those who envied her were glad. There is a curious meanness in human nature which delights when the mighty fall. Her true friends pitied her deeply, seeing how she must have suffered in secret all her life, since she was sixteen, for an error of judgment and a deed committed in phrensy.

Among others who saw the sad little history that first evening of its coming to the knowledge of the world, was the earl, who had just returned from his tour and was awaiting news of the crisis in Esther's illness before he sailed.

In this story he found the reason why Esther had at first accepted him and then broken the engagement. He saw that she had refused to marry him to save him from this wound to his pride. He inferred that she had learned in some way that her youthful folly might be made public, and this fear had held her back from linking him with her troubles.

He fully appreciated her delicate sense of honor, her unselfishness. He remembered that look in her beautiful eyes—a look of intense mental suffering—when he had seen her last.

If Esther had still been proud and brilliant, playing her part well before the world, perhaps the earl would have judged her past severely. But when he thought of her lying at death's door, stricken down as much by her hopeless love for him as by her dread of publicity, he loved her more tenderly than ever; his heart melted in divine pity. He said to himself:

"If Esther could only get well, I would marry her proudly in the face of everything."

Alas, Esther was very, very ill!

Lord Henry saw the story, too; his father talked to him about it. Both were very sad; yet, somehow, dark as the tragedy was, the younger man felt a load lifted from his heart. It was not so bad as he had feared after his last talk with Miss Silverman.

He could see a way to future happiness with Mercedes, if only this Alexander would cease tormenting her with his false claims.

Where Mercedes was, or what had happened to her, he did not know. His latest information had been gained from Maraquita, who had told him of the attempted abduction and how it ended.

This, of course, had increased his uneasiness, which was not lessened by the fact that Miss Silverman's servants knew nothing of her whereabouts—that no letters had arrived in her handwriting.

He had seen that Maraquita was comfortably provided for, and had tried to soften her dangerously bitter feelings toward Alexander.

He had been to the house about nine o'clock of that night on which Mercedes returned, and heard from Mephistopheles that it was the opinion of the medical attendants that Miss Silverman would sink and expire within twenty-four hours.

Father and son slept but little that night, arising the following morning with heavy hearts, prepared for the worst news. While they were at breakfast a note was brought to Lord Henry. His cheeks blazed up with sudden color when he saw the writing.

"From Mercedes, I know, father!"

Breaking the seal, he read:

"TO LORD HENRY:

"MY DEAR FRIEND:—I reached home at midnight to find my aunt given up to die by her physicians. I have but just been allowed to see her. The fever has left her, and she recognizes us, and her mind is perfectly clear; but they tell me she is too exhausted to rally. She has asked me to send for you. Will you come—immediately?"

MERCEDES."

He placed the note in his father's hand, for his voice choked when he attempted to read it.

"If she will see you, she will see me, Henry. She does not know I am here. Come! I am going with you."

They left the table, ordered a carriage, and in twenty minutes were admitted to the silent and darkened house, and conducted by Mephistopheles to the dim chamber where the lady of the house lay dying. The earl would not enter until permission from Esther was brought to him.

Was this the proud, brilliant woman whom he had last seen attired in satin, roses and diamonds, with eyes like stars, watching for him in the midst of a splendid company?

Something like a moan broke from the earl's compressed lips as he saw the lady of his love, pale as a snow-drop, lying there with closed eyes as if already dead.

When he came to her bedside, however, she opened those dark, dim eyes and smiled upon him.

"Gascoigne!"—her voice was but the lowest whisper.

"Do not fatigue yourself with trying to speak, dear Esther," drawing a chair close and taking the cold hand she made the effort to move toward him.

"I must talk a little. The doctor said it would make no difference; it will not hurt me so much as keeping still. He tells me I have but an hour or two of earthly life left. Have you seen what was in the papers yesterday, Gascoigne?"

Mercedes, who, with Lord Henry, was standing at the foot of the bed, started. Who had told her aunt about that?

Esther, quiet and observant, with every faculty clear as crystal, saw the movement of surprise.

"I learned quite by accident—a bit of newspaper wrapped about something which was brought to me—my eyes caught a word or two, and then I read on—you have seen it, Gascoigne?"

The earl nodded assent, unable to speak, and she went on in that faint, sweet, thrilling voice:

"I am glad. It saves me the trouble of going over it with you. I could not die at peace unless you knew it. Now, you see, why I refused to marry you. Are you not glad you are released from all ties which bind you to such a woman?"

"No, Esther, no! I love you more—better than ever! I feel how hollow, how wicked would be the pride which would keep me from happiness with you. Ah, Esther, my darling! my poor, unhappy one! live—live for my sake. If you will only get well, we will put all this aside, and be the most faithful and fond of husbands and wives. Esther, darling, will you not try to hold on to life for my sake?"

A faint flush came into the white face, a gleam of brightness to the fading eyes. She murmured:

"Then, Gascoigne, you love me yet?"

"More than ever."

"Then I die happy. All is for the best. I would not live if I could. I know what is best for both of us. But, Gascoigne, I hope and desire that those two may have a better fate than ours; that nothing may come between them—neither ancestral pride nor the machinations of enemies. I give Mercedes to you, Gascoigne, to be your daughter. You will find her true and tender and lovable. Will you do your best to keep her out of the hands of her father and his friends?"

"I will, I promise you, Esther."

"I have left her my property. It is not a mean one."

"Dear, dear Esther, do not trouble yourself about such things."

"And my—my blessing—to all of you three."

Mercedes sprang to lift the cup of wine to her aunt's lips, for a strange and awful change had settled upon the beautiful face; the earl motioned her back.

"Too late—no more—she has gone!" he sobbed.

Then the girl gave a cry of anguish and flung herself into Henry's arms, and, for the first time in his life he pressed his lips to hers, not with the passionate bliss of a lover but with the pitying tenderness of one who soothes and comforts.

"Oh, auntie, auntie, how could you go and leave me alone in this world!"

And then Lord Henry reproached her for saying she was alone; but she broke from him and rushed away to her own room in a burst of bitter grief; while Rosine, blind with tears, pressed down the lids over the once beautiful eyes of her dead mistress, and the earl and his son stumbled down to the library with tear-dimmed sight.

A stranger was sitting there by the center-table, twirling a pen between his thumb and fingers, while Meph stood in the hall by the door with his eyes upon him. The earl thought it might be the pastor of Miss Silverman's church; but the person, arising and bowing, said that he was sent to serve the process of arrest upon Esther Silverman.

"You will hardly care to arrest a dead woman," said the earl, shuddering at his own words.

"I beg your pardon, sir, a thousand times, but we're expected to do our duty. This colored person here told me the lady mentioned in the warrant was very ill and could not be disturbed; but how could I tell, I put it to you candidly, sir—how could I tell but it was all a sharp little game to bluff us off? If the lady is really dead, I dare say there are no objections to my taking a look at the corpse, so that I can carry back my testimony to that effect?"

The earl, in a tempest of indignation, would have kicked the fellow out of the room and had Mephistopheles finish the job; but Lord Henry saw that the intruder was only doing what he considered his duty; and offered to conduct him to the chamber of death.

One glance at the noble, beautiful features and the officer tiptoed out of the room, hat in hand; but he paused in the upper hall to say that he was directed to serve a subpoena upon Mrs. Alexander as a witness.

"There is no such person in this house," asserted Lord Henry, roundly. So the fellow went off; and

the young gentleman presently sought an interview with Mercedes, to speak of this last occurrence to her.

"If I make a written statement and swear to it before the proper official, will not that do?"

Lord Henry thought it would; and so Mercedes wrote out a brief declaration that her Aunt Esther had told her, as true, the same story the prisoner had given, acknowledging that she had killed young Cleveland, or supposed that she had; though she had nothing but a shadowy and indistinct recollection of an act committed in a state of temporary phrensy.

"That will free my father, I hope," she said, wearily.

"I will bring a notary here to the house, and you can swear to what you have written. I do not think you will be compelled to go to Connecticut as a witness, considering your circumstances."

On the day of the funeral, as Mercedes, pale and heavy-eyed, came down to the little Japanese boudoir back of the long drawing-room, to listen to the words read over her beloved dead, she cast a listless glance about her which changed into a flash of surprise as she saw her father and Mr. Alexander dressed in deep black occupying prominent positions as mourners. She would not look at them again; her heart beat with indignation and terror; she wondered how they dared to be there, while the solemn words of the service passed unheard for the loud throbbing in her ears. While the friends were taking their last look at the marble face of Esther Silverman, and the coffin was being conveyed to the hearse, Brant went into the boudoir and spoke to his daughter:

"They let me off precious quick, at the last," he said, in her ear, with a restrained chuckle. "I must say your aunt took exactly the right time to go to heaven! 'Tisn't everybody who knows just when to give up this world for the next. By the way, Bill, is in a deuce of a hurry to get back to Frisco. Better make up your mind to quit fooling and come along peaceable. 'Twill save trouble. And 'twon't do, you know, to go and commit bigamy with that English snob. But I must secure a place in one of the carriages; I'm going to do the pretty, and go to Greenwood. I shall come round to call on you, about seven, and finish the talk."

Greenwood! lovely city of the dead! How peaceful are thy silent streets! How beautiful thy marble palaces, thy emerald lawns, thy flashing fountains, thy gardens of rare bloom!

Sweet, calm, holy resting-place for tired spirits, worn out with the struggles of the world!

Level sunbeams, striking through under the trees, touched the new-made grave of Esther Silverman with a tender grace. One by one the carriages rolled away with the friends who had assisted at the last services; all but that which waited for the earl and his son.

Henry walked away, affecting to look at some of the costly monuments in the vicinity, leaving his father a few moments alone, for the young man saw that the other was deeply moved.

That dying murmur of his name, "Gascoigne," seemed still to linger in the earl's ears. He could not realize that all that was mortal of that glorious woman, on whose noble brow he had meant to place the diadem of a countess, was hidden forever under that little mound on which he gazed.

Death had finished Esther's bitter punishment for one act of indiscretion committed when a thoughtless school-girl.

What girl will care to repeat her folly? What girl will have judgment in her own untried opinions of character, who reads of the long, long sorrow which this brilliant, beautiful woman bore—the black shadow on what should have been a sunny life?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CUNNING OF JEALOUSY.

THE earl and his son returned to the house after the funeral. They were too uneasy about Mercedes to leave her long alone.

Lord Henry wished to warn her, over and over again, to be cautious about making it possible for Alexander to see her. He had been restless all the long ride to Greenwood and back, for he had seen Alexander at the house, and yet the man had not accompanied Brant, to the cemetery. Suppose he had some plan to seize upon the girl he called his wife while all her friends were away at the funeral?

The very suspicion of such a thing chilled him to the marrow. He was glad when the house was reached, running up the steps without waiting for his father. Mephistopheles received them as usual, except that he was sad and inclined to weep.

Joe, the *protege* of Mercedes, had gone to Greenwood, and was returning in another carriage. Meph showed the two gentlemen into the library, wishing to keep the front shutters closed, and went off to find Rosine and have her seek her young mistress to tell her they were returned.

"Do you know how Miss Mercedes is feeling?" Lord Henry asked, anxiously, before the man disappeared.

"Rosine told me, half an hour ago, Miss Mercedes had lain down, and 'peared to be asleep."

"If she is asleep warn Rosine not to awaken her; we will wait."

"You will stay to dinner, of course, my lord?"

"Yes."

Meph went off on his errand. In five minutes Rosine came into the library, so breathless, with such a scared look, that both gentlemen sprang to their feet.

"Miss Mercedes is not in the house!" she gasped.

"Are you sure?" asked the earl, aroused and excited.

"I cannot find her anywhere."

"How long has she been gone?" Lord Henry forced himself to ask.

His voice was hoarse and he trembled from head to foot.

"Certainly not more than half an hour. 'Twas a quarter to five when I looked at her, my lord, lying on the bed seeming to sleep. She was tired out, poor thing, with being awake and fretting; so I thought I'd go to the kitchen and have a cup of tea, for I was used up myself. It isn't quite half-past five this minute, sir."

Just then Meph showed a troubled countenance at the door.

"Where were you when Rosine was in the kitchen?"

"I'd closed up the front of the house, an' gone to the dining-room to 'tend to the silver, sir. The door was fastened with the night-latch, so nobody couldn't come in without a night-key. Nobuddy has one 'ceptin' Miss Silverman an' me. Mine was on the inside—I could swear to that!"

Lord Henry went to the door; the latch-key was gone!

"Either you are mistaken, Meph, or some one has taken it."

"I guess I know! Oh Lordy, p'raps that tall Californy gentleman that come with Mr. Brant stole it," suggested Meph.

"It is not impossible," the earl had to admit.

"Oh, father!"—Lord Henry turned chalk-color.

"He could hardly carry off the young lady without her consent. Somebody, in or out of the house, would have seen what was going on. She would have screamed or struggled."

But the young gentleman remembered what Maraquita had told him about the chloroform, and refused to be comforted.

"Was there any odor of chloroform, in her room, Rosine?"

"Now you ask me, there *was* a strong odor of something; yes, it was what Miss Silverman used to give me for toothache."

Lord Henry groaned and ground his teeth.

"I heard a carriage drive off about ten minutes before yours returned," added Meph. "I thought it was you, arriving, an' went to the door; but when I opened it there wasn't nobody there, an' I just looked up an' down the street, an' closed it again an' went back to my work."

"I think I had better blow my brains out!" observed Lord Henry, moodily.

"That would not help her you love, my boy! Come, cheer up! Let us do something—not stand here deliberating. We must inquire of the policeman whose beat is in this neighborhood—must telegraph to all the stations to have men on the lookout."

"You attend to all that, will you, father? I am going straight off to Maraquita; she may be able to give me better advice than any of you."

He hurried to the respectable boarding-house at which the Spanish girl was staying. She was ill in bed, but arose to receive him. He told her what had happened.

"This is the first day I have had my eyes off him," she said. "I was so sick this afternoon, I had to lie down. So, this is what comes of it! I cannot advise you what steps to take. There are plenty of places in this great city where he can hide her, if he wishes. He has money enough to bribe people to do anything."

"What hotel has he stopped at?"

She told him, and he went off in haste to ascertain whether Mr. Alexander might not be there. To his great astonishment, he saw that gentleman sitting in the rotunda, quietly conversing with a group of bankers and stock-brokers about the state of monetary affairs in San Francisco.

Inspired with hope that nothing serious had befallen Mercedes, he rushed back to her residence to find that she was certainly gone. It was terrible for a high-strung spirit like his to be kept in suspense, as he was all that wretched night.

Brant called at the house about seven, seeming very much surprised when informed that his daughter had disappeared.

"She's taken herself off because she didn't want to meet me. I told her I was coming to see her this evening. She is in the house of some of your neighbors and will return when she gets ready," he said to Rosine.

Henry hoped this might be so, when told what Brant had said, but the night wore on, and all their inquiries were met with negatives.

He recalled his California experience, and his heart sunk lower and lower. It seemed to him that his heart was withering in his breast and his golden locks turning gray.

After midnight he remained at police headquarters, looking for some tidings to come in from some direction. None came.

Feeble and worn out, he returned, after daylight, to Mercedes's residence. Mephistopheles compelled him to make a show of eating some breakfast. While he was drinking the strong coffee which his feverish thirst made welcome, Brant came again to the house to ask if anything had been discovered as to his daughter's whereabouts. The servant showed him into the dining-room where the gentlemen were. He asked for a cup of coffee, sipping it, and affecting great ease; but Henry's keen blue eyes searched him with a gaze that made him nervous.

As he set down his cup, and rose from his chair, saying he must go, the young nobleman arose also, sprung at him and clutched him by the throat.

"You know where she is, you old hypocrite! If you don't tell me, I will shake the life out of you!"

"Henry, Henry," cried the earl, "you have no right to do that. You will go into trouble!"

"I am in trouble," panted the young athlete, whose weakness and fatigue had vanished under the fierce stimulus of his anger. "I cannot be in worse. Tell me what you have done with her, you villain, or I will choke you to death."

Brant was purple in the face with the gripe at his throat; but he was a very powerful man, with muscles of steel, and was not long in forcing Lord Henry to let him go.

"Curse you," gasped the miner, when he was free, "I could shoot you down this minute like a dog! But I won't do it! I've got the best of you, and I want to start for Frisco this evening, so I won't put myself in the lock-up by shooting at you, you young puppy! You think, because you are an earl's son, that you are some pumpkins, don't you?—but I'll let you know I'd rather have the gold-bug of Frisco for a son-in-law than a dozen my-lords! My girl is right where she ought to be. She was married over again to Bill Alexander last night, to satisfy her scruples; an' I made sure it was *she* this time, you bet! You'd better run back to England now, sonny, as quick as you can," and Ben, with an insolent laugh, turned and went out.

Lord Henry could not answer him a word. So, they had forced her into that marriage, had they? This coarse creature, with brutal disregard of his daughter's feelings, had compelled her to perjure herself by the vows of a marriage she loathed?

His own loss and disappointment were not what crushed him—it was the thought of her unhappiness, her despair.

"Perhaps he tells you this story to prevent your further search," suggested his father.

"I wish I could think so, but I fear he has spoken the truth."

Lord Henry threw himself down on the sofa in a fit of utter despondency. Hope being gone he had no courage left. The earl could not arouse him to make any further efforts, finally himself returning to his hotel to write letters home.

In the afternoon the unfortunate lover made up his mind that he would go and see Maraquita once more. Mephistopheles assisted him to put his neglected toilet in better order, and he crawled out on his errand, returning disappointed. The Spanish girl was not at her boarding-house; they told him she had gone out the previous evening and that she had not returned.

However, Lord Henry had hardly more than regained the house when the servant informed him that some one wished to see him.

"What sort of person, Meph?"

"A handsome young woman, my lord, with black eyes."

Lord Henry sprang up, with a more animated look.

"Show her into the library, please. She is the very person I want to see."

Maraquita, lithe, slender, her broad-brimmed hat in her hand, glided into the room. Her large eyes seemed fairly to light the place, they blazed with such a burning brightness. There was a hot color on her thin cheeks—the poor girl had certainly grown wan and emaciated since he first saw her—and, although she stood before him composed and quiet, she gave him the impression that he might have received from one of those little infernal machines, so innocent outwardly, but set within to strike the fuse at a certain hour and hurl everything to destruction.

"I can tell you where she is," she spoke, before he could say a word. Her voice was low and tense.

"Is she married to that scoundrel? Oh, God, Maraquita, do not crush me by telling me that she is!"

"I do not know to a certainty. She may be. If not she will be, this evening."

"How do you know? Have you seen her? Where is she?"

"She is in a house over the river, in a place I think they call Jersey City Heights. It is a hotel out on the plank-road kept by a man named Garrant. He and his wife have been told that the young lady is a Mrs. Alexander, lately gone insane—that her form of insanity is not to recognize her own husband, but to show fear of him and say curious things about him—to be turned against her relatives, who, she imagines, persecute her. The Garrants have been shown the certificate of marriage and the priest's letter, to prove that everything is right; and they have been told that her father and husband have brought her from San Francisco, hoping the change of climate might restore her; that she was so violent in New York that they were afraid they would be compelled to put her in an asylum, and so had brought her there, where it was quiet, to avoid the necessity of placing her in an institution. They scatter their money freely; so, of course, the people of the house are glad to accept their story, and, treating Miss Mercedes as if she were insane, wink and blink at her passionate appeals, which have not the least effect upon them."

"How did you learn all this?"

"I went to the hotel where Bill stops. I went there in disguise—as a newsboy. I saw him, Bill, chatting away with a lot of gentlemen. *Caramba!* that did not deceive me. I sold him a paper, and then I hung about on the pavement, with my papers under my arm, as an excuse."

"Excuse me, but where did you find boy's clothing so readily?"

"I made it. Last night is not the first time I have worn it. I have tracked Bill more than once! It was in my trunk ready for this very need. I saw Ben Brant lounge into the hotel about nine o'clock, and the two go off together. I did not let them out of my sight until I saw them enter that house across the river. I got lodging in that house last night. You may well believe I kept myself out of *their* sight. I don't believe they were married last night, for Bill went off in half an hour. Brant remained with his daughter all night, leaving her locked in her room this morning while he hurried over to New York; the landlady was well paid to watch her, to prevent her escape. But Mrs. Garrant had considerable to do, and I offered to keep guard for her at the door

and windows, if she would give me a quarter. To this she readily agreed. This gave me a chance to hold a whispered communication through the key-hole. Holy Mother! you can imagine the joy of our poor young lady when she heard that I was there! She told me that they were to bring a priest to-night, under the pretense that her insanity made her say that she was not married, and that it might quiet her to have the ceremony repeated. Ah, my lord, need I tell you how she begged and prayed me to inform you, and ask you to come to her rescue? I think she will be really insane if she remains there many hours longer. I have a plan, myself, that will fix Bill Alexander."

"What is it?"
Maraquita played with the ribbon on her hat and smiled.

"I have never forgiven Bill for throwing me out of the buggy that night."

"Ah! but you must not think of taking the law in your own hands."

"Dios sabe! What will you have? What will you do? You cannot get the police and go to that house and demand the young lady! What! you who are a young man, no relative! Do you think the officers will take her from her own father—her husband? Those two will shake their heads and smile, and look wise. Insane? Oh, ah, yes! The police will go away. The more our poor young lady cries, and begs, and declares before high Heaven she is not a wife, the more they will shrug their shoulders and grin. You see it?"

Lord Henry seized the girl's thin hands and wrung them.

"What can we do?"

"Are you willing to leave it to me?"

"I do not see that I can help myself. Maraquita, I hope you will not do anything to get *yourself* into trouble!"

She laughed.

"I will not kill him, I promise you. Is not that enough? But, I must resume my disguise and return to Miss Mercedes. What I want of you is, to be there, near the house, with two or three good men, at dusk."

"I can take Meph and my father—will that be enough?"

"If you are armed. But stay, how will you find the place? Let me see! I will meet you at the ferry at half-past five. I shall be a newsboy, with a bit of red ribbon pinned to my coat-collar. You will not appear to notice me, but you will take the same car that I take, and ride up the hill."

Lord Henry's eyes sparkled; he was a different man from the supine being who had received the Spanish girl.

"Anything that a man can do for the woman he loves, I will do," he said. "Ah, Maraquita, what do I not owe you? You have been sharper than any of us."

"The eyes of jealousy are said to be keen, my lord."

"Keener than those of love?"

"A thousand times."

"I wish it were half-past five now!"

"I do not. I want time to change my dress and get something to eat. I am faint with hunger."

"Ten thousand pardons!" Lord Henry rung the bell. "Mephistopheles, this lady has brought us good news! Have a nice luncheon set for her, and then come to me. I have something to tell you."

"Ah, my lord, you have heard from Miss Mercedes! I can see it in your face."

"Yes, I have. Attend to my friend here, first, and then you shall hear all that there is to hear. Mind! a glass of your choicest amontillado and all the tidbits you can get together!" and the young gentleman smiled gayly, he felt so full of hope.

When Maraquita was seated in the luxurious dining-room, assiduously waited on by the *factotum*, she asked a singular question:

"Is there a medicine-chest in this house?"

"My mistress always kept one," and Meph wiped his eyes into which the tears had risen.

"May I look into it? I wanted to find something for my headache."

"I will ask Rosine to bring it, miss."

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHECKMATED.

It was seven o'clock of a bright, cool, starlit evening.

Lights were flitting here and there through the two stories of a plain frame dwelling standing quite by itself by the side of the plank road which stretched across a long breadth of Jersey swamp.

This "public house" had little patronage, except from the owners of fast horses, who stopped there for a feed for their animals and perhaps a lunch for themselves—certainly always for such refreshment as may be found in a "whisky straight" or a "brandy smash." This evening there appeared to be more to do than usual; the landlady was bustling about from the bar to the kitchen, in which latter place might be found signs of an approaching feast, in the shape of a good, hot supper, with fresh fish, roast fowl, fried oysters, coffee, and so forth.

Down on the marsh, behind the tall flags which rustled dolefully in the autumn wind, three men were crouching.

Driving up the road from the direction of the city, came a carriage in which were also three men—one of them wearing the black robe of a priest. This vehicle drew up at the door, and Garrant went out to welcome his guests and to see to the horses which one of the gentlemen had driven, thus making it necessary for the landlord to take the team around and see that his stable-boy did his duty by it.

Mrs. Garrant found the little newsboy, who had

been hanging around the place for the last twenty-four hours, very "handy."

She put him in charge of the pan in which the oysters were being fried while she went to attend to the bar. He did the bread-crumbed bivalves to just the right shade of brown, and she was much pleased with his work, promising, on her return to the kitchen, to give him a good supper if he would stay by and help wait on table. The boy said he was willing.

In a few minutes the delicious viands were placed on the table and the trio of gentlemen summoned. They appeared to enjoy the meal in a chastened, subdued way. Of course they spoke sadly of the poor, insane young wife up-stairs; but their appetites were not ruined by thoughts of her. The priest was very sympathetic, though his eyes glistened with the consciousness of two double gold eagles in his pocket.

There was only a single bottle of sherry on the table—not a glass of punch, not a mouthful of "Blue Grass," yet long before the comfortable meal was finished the voices of the three grew thick and husky; they looked at each other with stupid, glassy eyes, and presently, one by one, gave signs of some "drowsy spell" which was fast wrapping their senses. The landlord, who had done the carving, noticed it, making up his mind that his guests had drank pretty freely before leaving the city, and that the oppression of the room had done the rest.

"Let them nap awhile, if it suits 'em," he said to the "handy" newsboy.

"Yes, sir, of course, sir," was the meek response.

Then the black-eyed, handsome little chap stole out to the stable and surreptitiously ordered the hostler to harness up, saying, that the priest was in a hurry to get back to his home.

The stable-boy obeyed his orders, while he proceeded in the direction of the clump of flags, whistling, or trying to whistle.

His signal, at all events was heard. Three dark figures silently arose and stalked forward toward the house, like phantoms grim and speechless.

The burly landlord did not regard them as phantoms, however, when they suddenly appeared before him in his own bar-room, each with revolver pointed at his trembling heart, and demanded the key to the room of the young lady whom he had dared keep in durance vile. He determined to resist them, backing into the dining-room and calling for reinforcements; but the three guests who started up aghast at his summons, sunk back in their chairs again, stupidly.

"What in the devil's name is the matter with you fellows?" queried the landlord; but a grunt or moan was the only reply.

"Very well! since you refuse the key, we will break down the door," and the intruders marched up the stairs, led on by the red-cheeked newsboy, to a certain door.

Garrant concluded he had better unlock it than allowed it to be battered in, so he did as required, with an ill-grace.

There stood Mercedes, tall and lovely and pale, like a lily that had been transported to some kitchen-garden. With a glad cry she rushed into Lord Henry's arms.

"My own dear love! Thank God I have found you," he cried, holding her an instant to his heart. "But we must hasten! This is no place for you, my darling. Let us get out of it."

As rosy now as she had been pale, Mercedes held out her hand, with a charming smile, to the old earl, who first kissed it, and then drew her away down the stairs and out into the yard where the carriage stood with the horses attached.

He placed her inside, climbed in himself and called to his son and Meph to hasten. Lord Henry was waiting to persuade Maraquita to come with them; but she, now that her plan for the rescue of Mercedes had succeeded, refused to return to the city with them.

"No, no, I shall remain here. My life has nothing more to do with yours. I shall stay by Bill. He may strike me again when he comes to his senses; but I shall stay by him, all the same. Farewell, my lord. Tell your lady-love I shall always remember her. Let me give you one piece of advice—marry Miss Mercedes to-night! Then you may really be her friend and protector. She is alone, without near relatives to care for her. If you wish to have the right to befriend her, make her your wife, without further delay. Circumstances indeed now demand it."

"God bless you, Maraquita! You have been a noble friend to us. If I thought—if I dared—I should be the happiest man on the face of the earth!"

"Tell her that I say she *must* consent to the only course that will straighten the tangled threads of her and your own fate. Tell her Maraquita commands her to do it."

Again the earl called his son. Meph was on the box, the reins in his hands. The pale Spanish girl, whose eyes were now dull, and whose hot cheeks were growing colorless, noticed that her words had kindled a light of happiness in the blue eyes of the young nobleman.

"I shall persuade her to obey you, dear Maraquita. Good-by. Good-by. Surely we shall see you to-morrow?"

Mercedes looked back wistfully, when she found her friend was not coming, but the horses dashed away at such a rate of speed that she had only a glimpse of the slim figure standing under the light of the lamp in the tavern yard.

"Who the deuce are you, anyhow?" asked the angry voice of the landlord in Maraquita's ear. "I reckon I'd better send for the police."

"That would be the worst thing for yourself that you could do. Those persons who came for the young lady, are not people to be trifled with. It will

not be good for you or your house to have it known that you kept an innocent woman a prisoner here, because two scoundrels paid you for doing it."

"Listen! those guests of yours have taken morphine in their drink—not enough to seriously harm them. Get them quietly to bed. They will be all right in the morning. Now, if you please, I will have that supper your wife promised me, and I, too, will go to bed, for I am wearied out."

"You are the devil's own! I dare say you'll do as you please, my pretty chap," growled the landlord, who was wise enough to conclude that the boy had given him good advice.

When the boy came out of his room, the following morning, the tavern-keeper and his wife stared in astonishment.

"Well, the tantrums take me, if I don't believe Old Nick has got hold of the house, Sally!" for, instead of the jaunty newsboy, there came down-stairs a handsome girl, dressed in black silk, her long, silken black hair braided down her back, a gold ring on the fourth finger of her left hand, guarded by another set with a great blazing diamond.

"How are the two gentlemen?" she asked, very quietly.

"They seem to be sleeping mighty heavy, miss. Hope you haven't got me into trouble by giving them an overdose. The priest got up, an hour ago, and went off, feeling rather sick and a good deal puzzled."

"Have your wife make some very strong coffee. When it is ready take it up, wake up the two sleepers, and make them drink freely. They will soon be all right, I assure you. It is now time for them to awaken."

The landlord eyed the black-eyed girl who calmly gave these orders as if she were a witch; then went meekly to obey her.

Maraquita had some of the coffee, too, when it was made, afterward taking a stroll along the monotonous plank-road, returning in about an hour.

"How are the gentlemen by this time?"

"Awake, but a little sick and dizzy."

"In which room is the tall gentleman with the mustache?"

"You had better not go in there; he's in an awful rage."

"I am not afraid of my own husband."

"Oh-h!"

The tavern-keeper was completely taken aback.

The tall gentleman, according to his understanding, had been married to the insane lady, whom a party—perhaps from the Lunatic Asylum—had carried off the previous evening.

But he pointed out the room; the lady entered it and closed the door.

Alexander was sitting up, in a rocking-chair, looking yellow and drowsy. A dull gleam of hatred came into his eyes when he saw who it was that entered.

"So! it was *you* who played me this infernal trick?"

"It was, Bill."

"Do you know I would like to wring your neck?"

"Dios sabe! I dare say."

"Where is she?"

"Who? Your prisoner—your victim?"

"My wife!"

"Here!"

"Maraquita, I really am afraid I shall hurt you. You had better go away."

"You cannot hurt me half so much as you have done before this, Bill. I am your wife—your only lawful wife; you cannot shake me off by any power but death."

Just then there came a knock at the door. Maraquita opened it and received a sealed note addressed to herself from the landlord, who explained that a messenger had just brought it to the house. She read it over twice or thrice; then looked Alexander full in the face.

"I can tell you, now, where the lady is of whom you inquire. She was married last night to Henry, eldest son of the Earl of Essex, and is now, with her husband and his father, about going on board the Cunard steamer which sails this morning. The boat will have left her dock before you could get half-way to the ferry, if you were fit to go, which you are not."

"You have checkmated me, Keety. A woman's wit against the Devil's cunning and the woman wins. Oh, you are a sweet one!" and he smiled bitterly.

"But I can make her trouble yet," he continued;

"I can accuse her of bigamy."

"You will not do it, Bill. Those are resolute people she is with. You will go back to California, as you ought, and behave yourself. A hundred times I have made up my mind to kill you, Bill Alexander! My love is turned to hate. You have treated me with brutal contempt. But I am your wife. See! this ring! You cannot help yourself. I do not propose to trouble you by ever reminding you of my existence—unless you attempt to marry. In that case you will hear from me. Good-by. Let me advise you to be careful of your strength—you do not look well. Unless you lead a regular life, you will not live five years. If you should die, it would make me a very rich woman—so try to take care of yourself," and with a scornful laugh, Maraquita waved her hand to him, and went away—where, he neither knew nor cared.

He bit his lips till the blood started, thinking of the inexorable wheels of the great steamer, whirling and churning the blue waters of the bay, while he was chained to this room.

When the crafty face of Ben Brant appeared, an hour later, in his half-opened door, the Bonanza king met his inquiring look with one of sullen reserve. It was the look of baffled rage and mortifying defeat.

The gold-bug had been wholly thwarted—out-schemed—overthrown.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A GLIMPSE DOWN A ROSE-LINED VISTA.

LORD HENRY was walking up and down a noble terrace at Essex-court, one of his father's country-seats, with his lovely wife leaning on his arm. They had been married a year and a day, and in that time the only shadow on the sunny splendor of Mercedes's life was her sorrow for the beloved dead, who rested, far away, in peaceful Greenwood.

Her days had all gone by like days in dreams, full of poetry and passion and tender beauty. As Lord Henry said to her, laughingly, with his blue eyes fixed fondly on her fair face, "since their courtship had been so bitter, their honeymoon should be long and sweet."

"I believe it will last forever," was her earnest reply.

They walked up and down the long, paved terrace, with borders of velvet sward set thick with roses and lilies. The sun was setting, the birds twittering, the flowers sending out their evening incense through the great cathedral of the world, domed over by the sapphire sky.

"That one wretched year of my life seems like an ugly dream," said Mercedes. "Before that I was a spoiled child; since that I am a spoiled wife."

The rays of the low sinking sun fell over her golden hair as her husband looked at her fondly and proudly, believing that he had the sweetest and most perfect of women for his own.

Certainly, amid the dozen or two of noble ladies gathered at Essex court for the month of September there was not one who could compare with its beautiful mistress.

"I believe my father is as proud of you as I am," declared Henry.

Mercedes sighed, thinking of her aunt—her brilliant Aunt Esther, who might have been with them, happy and honored, if trouble had not driven her into her grave.

Just then a horseman came riding up from the nearest railroad station, with a telegram, which a servant brought and placed in his lady's hand. She trembled a little as she opened it; a telegram coming to a house seems always ominous.

It was dated at San Francisco and was from the lawyer of "the late Benjamin Brant," informing her that her father was dead—killed by an accident in his own mines—and that, she being the sole heir to an estate worth not less than \$5,000,000, he would await instructions from her before doing anything toward settling it up.

Mercedes was shocked to hear of her father's death; but that it was a heart-breaking grief to her could not be expected. She wept more because she could not feel for him what a daughter should feel, than for any deeper pain.

In a short time, acting under the earl's advice, she sent an agent to look after her interests in California. The news of her immense fortune gave her an éclat, with some, greater than her perfect beauty and charming manners. It was admitted, even by other jealous beauties, that Lord Henry's American wife was no discredit to an old name and an honored position.

Mercedes had written several times to Maraquita, to San Francisco, without ever receiving any answer. About this time, however, a letter came to her, with some faults of spelling and composition, but very precious to my lady for all that. It told her that Maraquita was now happy and contented. "I am living with my husband," it said. "He is ill; he has not been well for some months, and at last he sent for me, saying he felt the need of me; so now I am very happy taking care of him. All the old bad, bitter feelings are put away. The doctor says he thinks Mr. Alexander has a good chance to recover, under my care, and that makes me very happy and contented. Write to me, my sweet friend, my dear young lady, and that will be the next best thing to seeing you. I received your letters, but could not answer them while I was so miserable. Now all is changed, thanks to the blessed Mary Mother."

"Your fond friend, MARAQUITA."

THE END.

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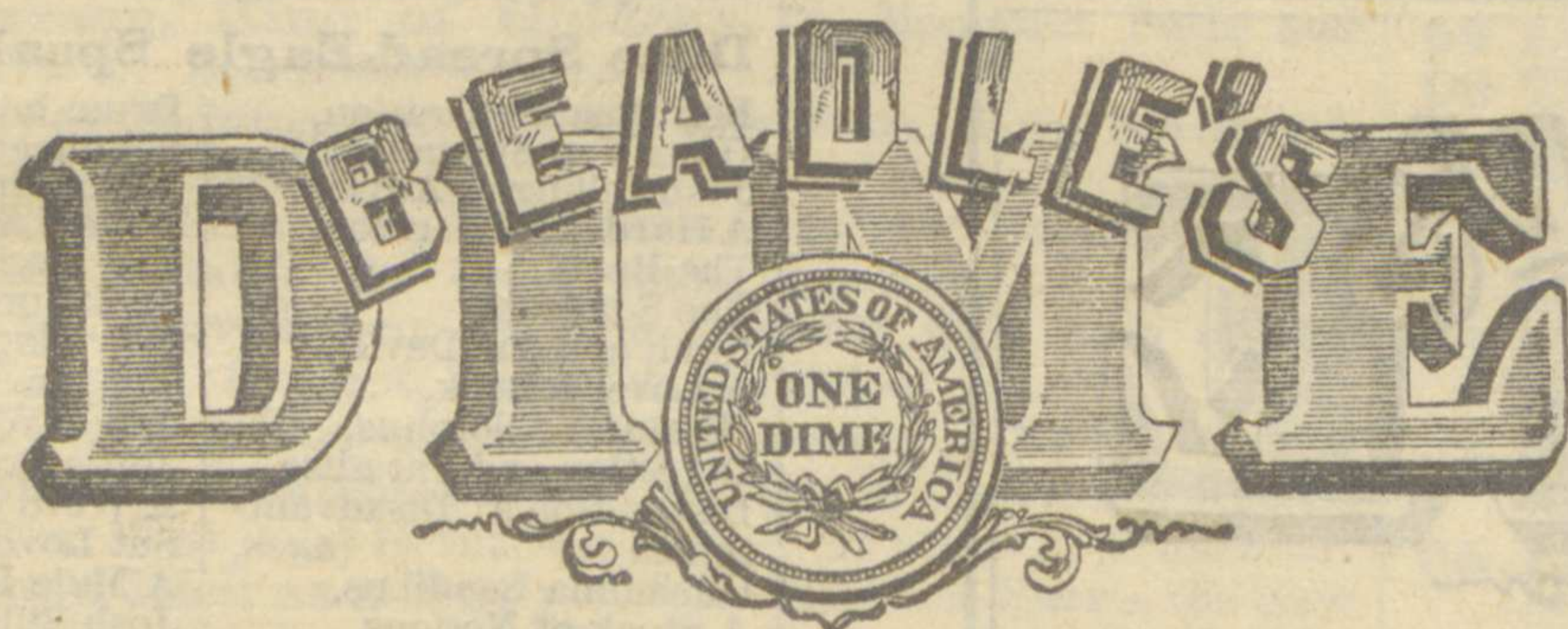


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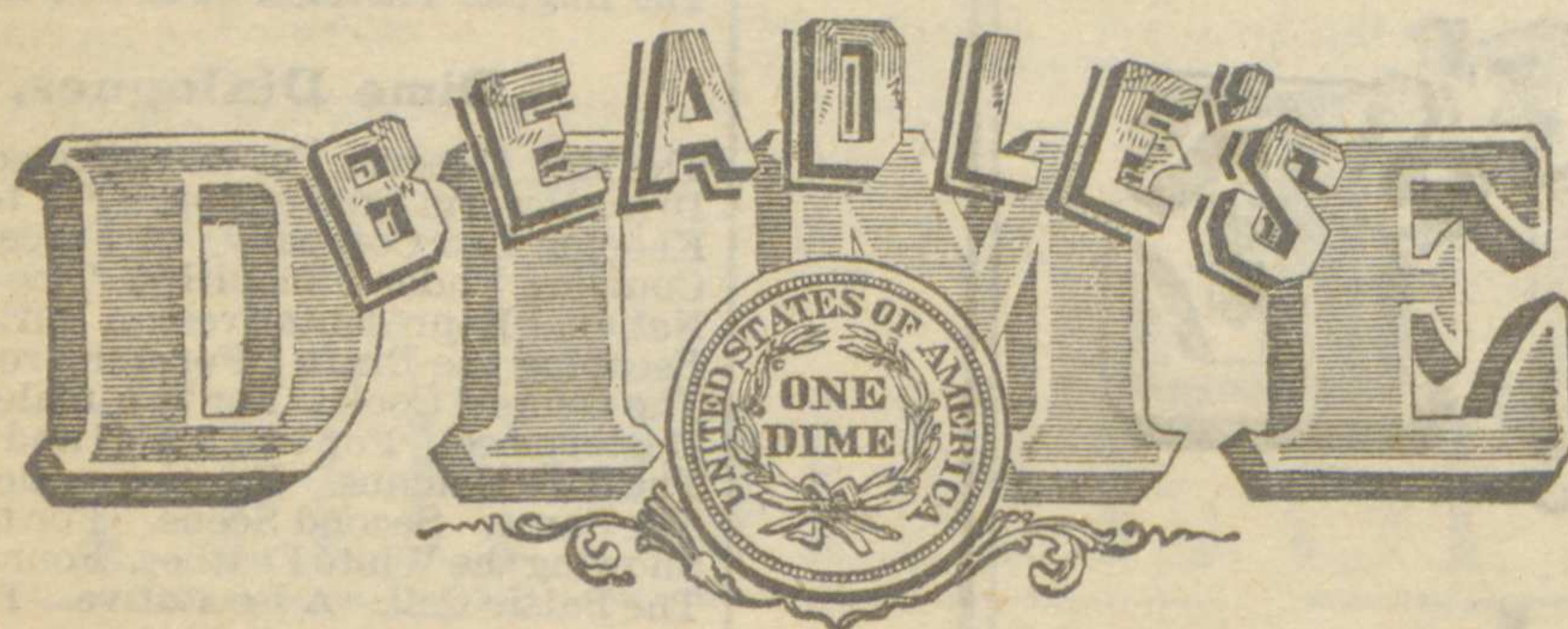
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